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# **A WOMAN AT THE ABYSSINIAN WAR**









A ZAPTIE ONE OF THE NATIVE MOUNTED CARABINIERI

# **A WOMAN AT THE ABYSSINIAN WAR**

by  
**MURIEL CURREY**  
**O.B.E.**



**With 31 Illustrations**

**HUTCHINSON & CO.**  
**(Publishers), Ltd.**  
**LONDON**

PRINTED IN  
GREAT BRITAIN,  
BY THE ANCHOR  
PRESS, TIPTREE,  
ESSEX :

1936

## NOTE

THE words, “Amba”, “Enda”, “Mai”, and “Adi” occur so frequently in the place names that it may be of interest to explain their meanings. “Amba” means a plateau; “Enda” is a church; “Mai” signifies a stream or spring; “Adi” (or Addi) may be literally translated by the Italian *paese*, i.e. either a district or a village.



## FOREWORD

No one is more conscious than the author of the many shortcomings of this book. It is not a military history of the first three months of the operations in the Tigrai, but merely the impressions and experiences of one who followed as closely as possible the advance of the Italian troops. It was written from day to day, some of it by the roadside while motor-lorries, batteries of artillery, and cars tried to pass each other on perilous mountain tracks ; some of it was written on the corners of mess-tables ; some of it on the wall of Fortino Coatit during the long morning vigil while General de Bono waited for the news of the first advance ; some of it in the wild fastnesses of the Tembien. It is a faithful record of the life of the Italian Army as the author saw it—a life of mingled excitement and boredom, of the cheerful endurance of hardships, of great marches and long periods of inaction, of unceasing struggle with the difficulties of a roadless and mountainous country. It is also a faithful record of the attitude of the native population to the advancing troops, of the immediate results of the freeing of the slaves, of the provision of free medical treatment, of the feeding of the hungry and the effort to establish law and peace, which were unknown blessings in the Tigrai.

The question as to what books should be taken to a desert island was answered by the writer without any difficulty—Shakespeare and Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. The



natural doubt as to the interest or value the first impression of which this book is composed, was partially laid to rest by a sentence in one of Dr. Johnson's letters to Bennet Langton—*It is a rule never to be forgotten, that whatever strikes strongly should be described while the first impression remains fresh in the mind.*

*February 1936.*

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## CHAPTER I

### ON BOARD AN ITALIAN TRANSPORT

"I WANT to go to Eritrea to see what is happening there." I was talking to an Italian in an official position in London during August 1935. I expected a polite and non-committal smile at so foolish a statement, instead of which he replied : "Well, why not go ?" I looked at him to see if he was serious ; did he really think that it was possible that the Italian Government would allow an Englishwoman to visit a colony where it seemed possible that a war would break out at any moment ? I knew that both the Embassy in London and the Ministry of Press and Propaganda in Rome were being bombarded with applications from papers wishing to send out well-known correspondents, and that so far everyone had been told that no permits were being granted ; was it likely that I should succeed where they had failed ?

"Do you really think," I insisted, "that the Italian Government would let me go to Eritrea ?"

"I can make no promise," he answered, "but if you are in earnest, why don't you go to Rome and find out ?"

My original remark had been made rather in the spirit in which one might express a wish to visit the moon or some place equally beyond the bounds of possibility at the moment. Every day the papers printed long articles about Abyssinia ; it seemed that every day a book was published about that country ; half the people I knew were going to Addis-Ababa—but of Eritrea there was not a word.

What kind of place was it? What was happening to the thousands of Italian troops which had been poured into it? Why was there this wall of silence between it and the rest of the world? Could I go and find out the answer to all these questions for myself? Here was advice and cautious encouragement too valuable to be neglected. I could and would at least go to Rome.

When there is no news there is always a plentiful crop of rumours. Eritrea was reported to be full of malaria, the troops were decimated with typhoid, they were dying of thirst, the heat was unbearable, the floods made movement impossible; it was (of course) no fit place for a woman, the Italians were not even allowing their own Red Cross Units to proceed there. Kind friends pointed out that I had no experience of the tropics; that I had never even slept in a tent; that I knew nothing of the conditions I should have to face—all of which incidentally was perfectly true. Others with more vivid imaginations suggested that there would be lions, of which I vaingloriously declared myself not to be afraid; snakes, of which I was frankly terrified; or, as a last alternative, that I should be killed by the Abyssinians—to this I replied firmly that I meant to keep the Italian Army between me and the enemy. All such conversations and warnings ended up with the remark: "But of course the Italian Government will never give you a permit." So firmly was this last fact impressed upon me that it was with the gloomiest forebodings that I started for Rome. There I found an entirely different atmosphere; instead of criticism and opposition I received nothing but help and useful advice.

It was true that the Ministry was being besieged by journalists wishing to go to Eritrea, but so far the organization in the colony was not prepared to deal with the

numbers who were applying. If I would promise to say nothing about it a special exception might be made for me ; my case was different, as I did not wish to use the telegraph.

My application would be forwarded immediately to the Chief of the Government, but did I understand that life would not be exactly comfortable, especially for a woman ? It was the only occasion on which my sex was so much as mentioned, for Italians take the eminently sensible attitude that if a woman is prepared to do the same work as a man, and accept the same conditions as a man, no unreasonable obstacles should be placed in her way. At the same time, they will do what they can to see that she enjoys the smaller comforts of life. Within forty-eight hours the memorandum embodying my application was returned with the one word : *Si. M.* Without comment or inquiry, Signor Mussolini had given me his permission to proceed to Eritrea.

The news was immediately telephoned to me ; would I come and discuss details ? When I arrived breathless with excitement, the only question that remained to be settled was "When and how was I to get to Eritrea ?" My answer was very simple : "As soon as possible and in a transport."

Even this new and—from the English point of view—unheard-of request was received without demur. "I will telephone to the Ministries of War and of the Colonies and ask how soon you can have a cabin." Then my friend went on in an apologetic tone, "You will understand that it is not easy."

Easy ? I thought of the blank official refusal I should have met with from English authorities ; the mere idea of a woman being given a passage in the circumstances would probably have induced fits of apoplexy in various elderly admirals and colonels. I was indeed fortunate that neither

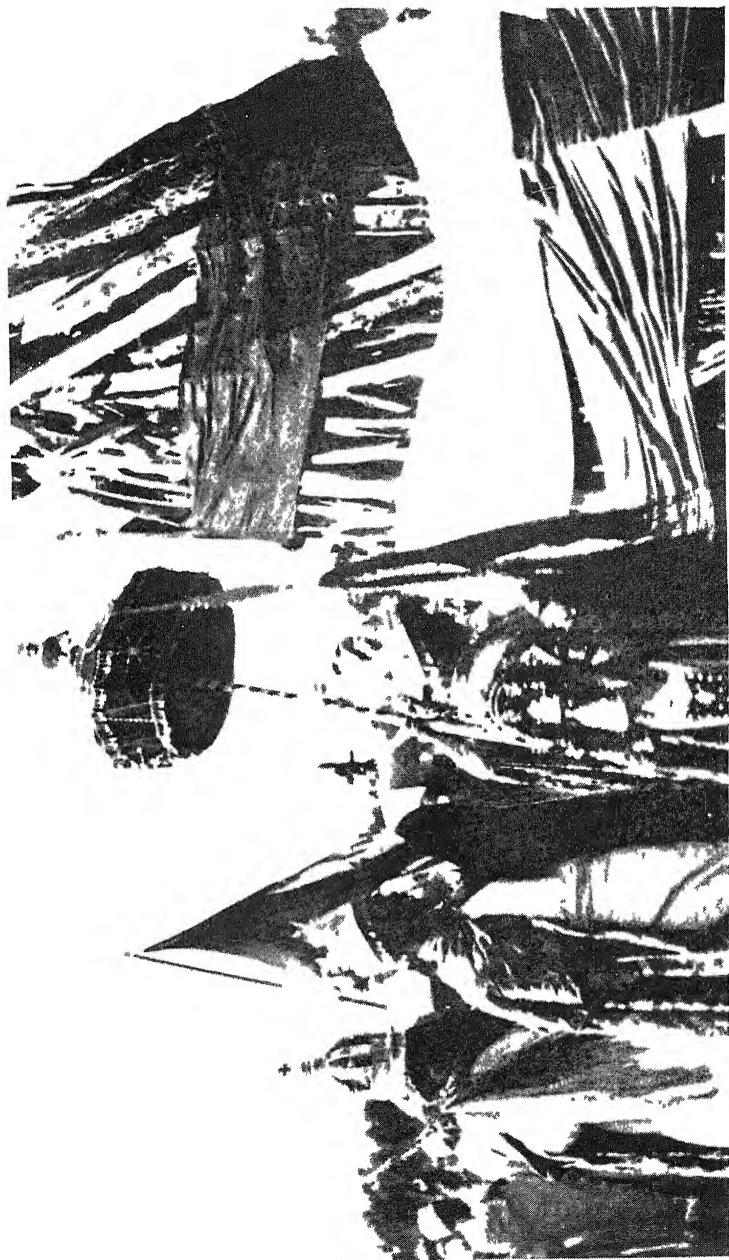


red tape nor conventionality held sway in the Italian Ministries.

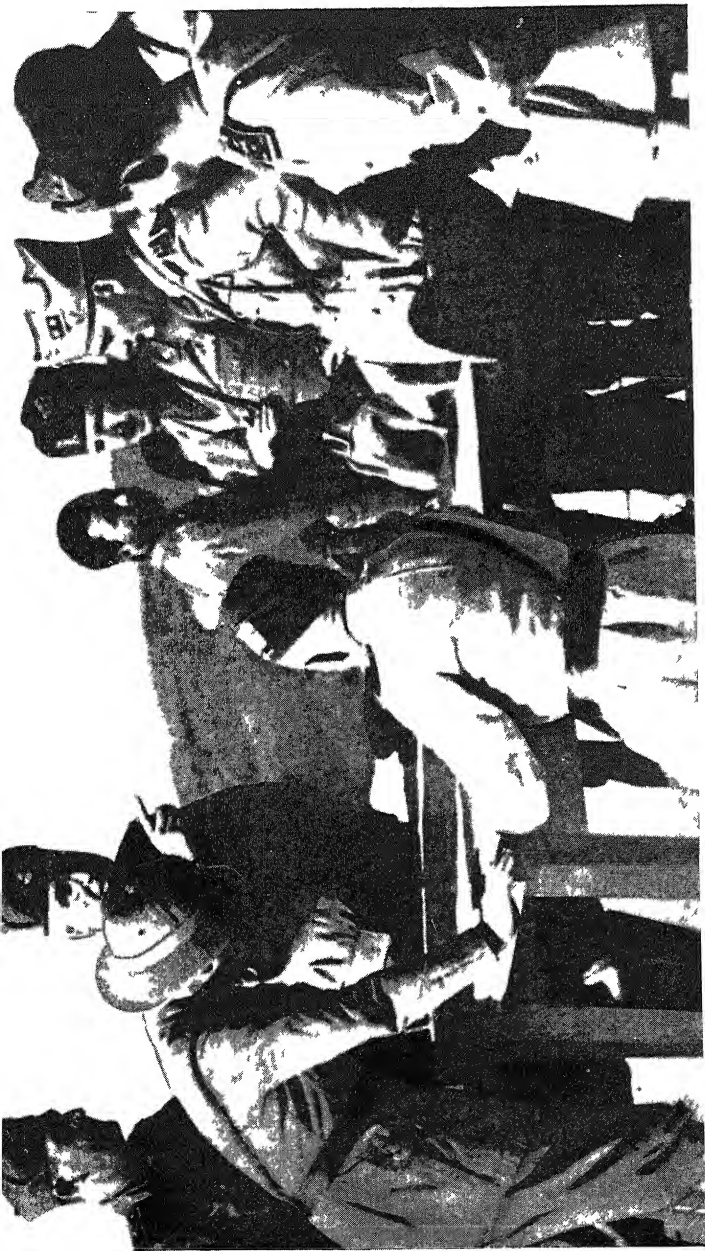
The next few days were spent in a feverish attempt to buy the necessary equipment. An Italian officer constituted himself my escort and took me to the Roman equivalent of the Army and Navy Stores. Everything was forthcoming except a tent ; the Ministry had warned me that there was not one left in Italy and suggested my writing to England, an idea which I received in non-committal silence. I knew that it would mean a delay of weeks, and I had no intention of being held up. I felt that if the Army of East Africa could not provide me with a tent it was worse equipped than I imagined. No woman of fashion ever fussed over the shape and fit of a new hat as my Italian friend did over my sun-helmet ; it had to be exactly the right size in order to provide the necessary protection. I refused to be interested, as I thought it both hideous and desperately uncomfortable, but I was made to try on at least a dozen before he was satisfied.

"A cabin has been reserved for you in the *Conte Biancamano*," I was told on Saturday, September 14th. "Can you be ready to sail on Wednesday next, the 18th?" Here was a real stroke of luck ; she was a fine transatlantic liner turned transport and was to carry a large contingent of Black Shirts ; needless to say my answer was an enthusiastic "Yes". But my desire to leave "as soon as possible" was to receive unexpected gratification.

On my return from a late cinema on Monday night, or, rather, on the Tuesday morning, I found an evening paper lying on my bed. Marked with the red pencil of danger was a paragraph announcing that the *Conte Biancamano* was sailing twenty-four hours earlier. Unfortunate officials of the Press Bureau were aroused from their sleep shortly after



COPTIC PRIESTS BLESSING THE BONFIRE AT THE MESCHEL



GENERAL DE BONO AND HIS STAFF WAITING FOR NEWS OF THE ADVANCE

daybreak in order to deal with the situation. "Was the news true and were my papers ready?" Kind but sleepy voices assured me that it was no good telephoning to the War Office at that hour, but they would let me know as soon as they had any news. At 9.30 a.m. I was asked to go and collect my permit and letters of introduction. "It is quite true the ship is leaving this afternoon, but if you can go by the 12.25 train you can catch her; we are telephoning to say you are coming."

There were inevitably moments on the journey to Naples when I visualized myself arriving at the docks only to see the *Biancamano* disappearing over the horizon, but there she was, towering above the quay, while a long line of men like a great brown snake crept up the gangway. Her decks, her bulwarks, her canvas-covered boats were all covered with men; the soldiers of the 230th Legion of the National Fascist Militia in their yellowish khaki with black facings gave her the appearance of having been invaded by a swarm of gigantic bees, while the deep hum which arose from the ship and the quay completed the illusion.

Every arrangement had been made, the embarkation officer was awaiting me at the gangway, and it only remained to convince a stupefied Carabinieri that I was sailing in the transport. He had all my sympathy, as no one could have been expected to believe such an unlikely story.

The sailing of any transport from any port in any country has a strong family likeness. There was the band playing patriotic airs, there was the vast crowd, there were cheers and answering cheers, growing to a sustained roar when the General commanding the base camp at Naples came aboard to say good-bye. The last detachment was coming up the gangway, and even an inexperienced eye could

see with what efficiency and rapidity the embarkation was being carried out. As each man came aboard he was handed a card with the number of his berth and shepherded straight to it to deposit his equipment. The General went ashore, the hawsers were cast off, and, punctual to the moment, the ship slid almost imperceptibly from the quay. The white handkerchiefs of the women, the red, white, and green tri-colour of Italy, the yellow and scarlet of the scarves of the *Avantgardisti* suddenly transformed the solid mass ashore into the semblance of a garden of flowers swaying in the wind. The cheers drowned the music of the band, but the effervescence and excitement which used to characterize an Italian crowd were lacking ; there was instead a deep note of seriousness in the voices. This was no adventure lightly undertaken by these volunteers ; they were going to serve their country in what every man believed was a righteous cause.

The setting sun turned the slopes of Vesuvius to a deep rose, the smoke of the volcano hung like a white plume in the still air, while the sea became a deeper blue. But even the beauties of the Bay of Naples paled in interest before what was happening on board ship.

Reminiscences of what I had heard in the days of my youth from British naval officers in command of transports returned to my mind as I watched the Italian naval officer in command dealing with the situation. In the excitement of the departure the Militia men had swarmed all over the ship ; they were sorted out, sent to their own quarters and made to understand that a notice which said "For officers only" was to be obeyed implicitly and without further instructions. Bewildered orderlies and batmen who tried to argue were shown the correct way round, and the "Army" was generally taught how to behave at sea.

There was then time to take stock of the officers whose fellow passenger I was to be. What might have been an embarrassing moment was made easy and pleasant by their courtesy and kindness; they disguised what must have been their extreme surprise at finding a woman—and particularly an Englishwoman—in their midst. The military chaplain gave a practical demonstration of his obedience to St. Paul's precepts about courtesy. He was quickly joined by other officers whose one preoccupation seemed to be to make me feel welcome. They immediately undertook my education in military matters; they explained the rank badges, how to distinguish between the officers of the Army and the Militia, and between the various branches of the Services.

There were a certain number of Army officers and details going to join their units in Eritrea, otherwise the *Biancamano* was carrying the three battalions (including the machine-gun detachment) of the 230th Legion of the National Fascist Militia. The Militia is an unpaid territorial organization liable to be called up in times of national emergency, but with no obligation to service overseas; it is hardly necessary to say that in 1935 every Legion was volunteering, indeed clamouring, to be sent to East Africa. In 1923 the Legions were formed out of the Fascist fighting detachments of the days of the revolution, and enlistment was voluntary. Now it is a highly prized privilege only to be achieved by those who have passed through the ranks of the Fascist youth organizations. Neither men nor officers are "amateur soldiers"; the men have done their service in the Army, while the senior officers are retired regulars and the juniors have been through the officers' training corps in their respective universities. The Roman military organization has been followed in the Militia, and the

officers have the Roman military ranks. At home the Militia wear the black shirt and the grey-green uniform, but for foreign service they are given a khaki kit with black facings.

The 230th Legion comes from the Abruzzi, where, as one of the officers proudly assured me, "the Italian race is purest; we have not suffered from the invasions that the other provinces have had". Every Italian is first of all devoted to his country, and secondly firmly convinced that he comes from its finest province.

The *Biancamano* is a ship of 24,500 tons, but even she was hard put to it to find accommodation for nearly 3,500 officers and men. All the public rooms, except half the first-class dining saloons, had been stripped of their furnishings and fitted with bunks for the men. These bunks covered the whole of the deck space in two tiers with very narrow passages. It meant uncommonly close quarters, but each man had a good mattress, pillow, and sheet—blankets are unnecessary impedimenta in the Mediterranean or the Red Sea in September. The cooking was done in the ship's galley by the regular cooks and the men messed on deck. Very good the meals looked—a large helping of macaroni, a good slice of meat and peas, a big roll of bread, and a pint of wine was an average day's dinner. The non-commissioned officers messed in the second-class saloon and the officers in what was left of the first-class saloon. Fortunately the sea was like a mill-pond, for, in bad weather, with everything battened down, nobody would have been exactly comfortable.

On the second night an impromptu sing-song can only be described as having "broken out" on the upper deck. It was started by four or five junior officers with an Abruzzi folk song; gradually nearly a hundred officers collected. They sang the songs of their province, the "hymns" of the

Fascist revolution, the marching songs which are now heard all over Italy. One man, in the true Italian tradition, taught the others a simple chorus and improvised topical verses, every allusion being received with a shout of delight. Again and again they sang "Abyssinia", the soldiers' song of 1935. Young and old, senior and junior, they all sang with the same fervour and simple enthusiasm which knew no self-consciousness. It would never strike an Italian today to be ashamed of his love of his country and his readiness to die for her if necessary. Nothing could have shown more clearly the difference between the Italian and English character; every decent Englishman is equally prepared to die for his country, but not to talk about it.

It is not the aim of this book to enter into the unhappy dispute between Italy and England over the question of Abyssinia, but the matter arose inevitably in the course of the long peaceful days at sea. Nothing could have been gentler than the way in which I was questioned about the attitude of my country and the patience with which my explanations were heard. One of the senior officers summed up the situation: "You have shown your confidence in us by coming with us." The phrase expressed my own conviction that, whatever situation arose, the innate good breeding and kindness of the Italians would not fail. Is there any other nation of whom an Englishwoman could say the same? It is this mutual confidence and understanding between the two countries, which had existed for centuries, that made the dispute the more tragic.

There is no need to explain to English readers the many currents of opinion which made the situation so bewildering to Italians; the Italian point of view was, however, little understood in England. Among those who had taken passage in the *Biancamano* was the Marchese Paulucci di



Calboli Barone. He had been for five years the head of Signor Mussolini's personal Cabinet, then for six years one of the Under-Secretaries-General of the League of Nations, and is now the President of "L.U.C.E."—the official cinematograph organization in Italy. He was proceeding to Eritrea to supervise the setting up of a unit which was to be responsible for the taking of news films. Probably no Italian was more competent to express the point of view of his country.

"Why has England behaved like this," he asked me; "why has she shown such sudden hostility to Italy? We have never threatened her or any part of her Empire. For years we have been trying to solve our very grave problems by peaceful means. We have a growing population to provide for; what have we done? We have spent enormous sums on developing our country; we have reclaimed waste land so that our people may have room to live and food to eat. At Versailles we received no mandate, while England, France, and even Belgium added vast tracts to their colonial possessions. I know from my personal experience that the strongest pressure was brought to bear on Signor Mussolini to induce him to raise the question of mandates at Geneva. He refused again and again—'It would mean opening the whole question of mandates, and that might lead to a European war. I will not do it.'

"But we must have room to expand," went on the Marchese Paulucci; "you have closed your Empire against our emigrants although there are large tracts of unpopulated land which our people could cultivate for the benefit of both our countries. You cannot 'bottle up' a people indefinitely, you will produce an explosion.

"We have tried for years to establish friendly relations with Abyssinia. It is a country in need of the help of a

civilized nation to develop its natural resources. We have patiently endured raid after raid into our territory in the hope that things would improve—that we could find at once an outlet for our population and a market for our goods. This could have done no harm but only good to England. The mistake that we made was supporting Abyssinia's application for membership of the League. We believed that the pledges she was required to give before she was elected would be carried out, and that slavery and disorder would be put a stop to. It was in the same hope that we signed the Treaty of Friendship in 1928, but none of her international obligations have been fulfilled and things have not become better.

“After years of experience at Geneva I believe that the League of Nations has a very great task to perform in the world, but its worst enemies are those unreasoning supporters who want, as you English say, ‘to make it run before it can walk’. Such a new organization needs to be very carefully built up, not to be given tasks beyond its strength. One of the mistakes of the Covenant is placing all nations on a footing of equality when they differ so profoundly. Who can pretend that Abyssinia is the equal of England? And who would have believed that we should have found England as the champion and protector of a slave-raiding and slave-trading country? Look at the descriptions of the barbarities and horrors practised in Abyssinia in the books written by Englishmen. And now the English pacifists are prepared to plunge Europe into war for the sake of such a people. It is mad. Do you really want to turn a colonial expedition, of which there have been so many in English history, into a world catastrophe?”

“We Fascists hate war, but we think that it is sometimes a grim and terrible necessity. We are not entering lightly on

this course of action, and do your socialists really think that they can stop us by threats? You are using the League of Nations not to help to keep the peace but to create war.

“There is every reason, historical and geographical, why our countries should be friends; they are probably the only two nations in Europe who have never fought each other. We have been allies for generations, there is nowhere in the world that our interests clash—and now you suddenly treat us as if we were your enemies! I cannot understand you.”

Every conversation which I had in the *Biancamano* bore out the truth of the words of the Marchese Paulucci. I never heard one word of the glorification of war for its own sake. (Let those who profess to see no difference between National-Socialism and Fascism ponder this fact.) The boys were gay and looked on the thing as an adventure—it is fitting that youth should be light-hearted. But the senior officers, who knew what war meant, were going in a different spirit. They were proud and happy to be serving their country, but each in turn would tell me of their homes, of their wives and children. “Do you think,” they would ask as they showed me the photographs that they carried in their pockets, “that I should have volunteered if I did not believe in the righteousness of our cause?” There could have been no doubt of their sincerity.

We reached Port Said at 11 a.m. on September 20th, our arrival being enlivened by the fact that two transports which had left Naples a couple of days before us were lying in the port. Their presence afforded the troops in all three ships a magnificent opportunity to try and out-cheer each other. Bands brayed their loudest, and “Giovinezza” and “Abyssinia” sung simultaneously added to a pandemonium which only Italians can create and certainly only Italians can enjoy. No one was allowed to land, but this was no hardship if

the rest of Port Said is as uninteresting as that seen from the harbour—modern and characterless. Its sky-line is decorated naturally enough with advertisements of whisky and—unnaturally—with advertisements of preserved milk. If its reputation is in any way deserved, it is hard to imagine that there is much demand for milk, preserved or otherwise, in Port Said.

For four hours the ship was besieged by bum-boatmen and women whose merchandise was lacking both in imagination and variety ; it consisted entirely of slippers, riding-crops, and sun-helmets. As the troops on board were exclusively infantrymen and everyone was supplied with a sun-helmet, not much business was done. However, the men enjoyed hanging over the side and shouting at the Egyptians, who screamed shrilly in reply ; the women of not uncertain age were given brevet rank as aunts, and were quite equal to dealing with their new-found nephews.

Much more exciting were the boat-loads of Italian residents who circled round the ship cheering and exchanging greetings ; they were answered with enthusiasm, and the clamour never ceased. As we weighed anchor and steamed slowly into the Canal they abandoned their boats and, leaping into cars, drove slowly along the bank, still cheering. Boys and girls of the Balilla (the Fascist Youth Organization) were drawn up on a small jetty and raised their shrill "*Vivas*". Even after darkness had fallen we were overtaken by three carloads of enthusiasts, and the ship's searchlight shone on a huge Italian flag which streamed in the breeze from one of the cars, while "*Giovinazza*" rang out over the desert.

One of the great interests of the voyage was provided by a study of the differences of the customs of the British Army (as expounded by one's soldier relations) and those

of the Legions of the Fascist Militia. To argue from the particular to the general is usually misleading, but certainly on board the *Biancamano* the relations between officers and men seemed to me to present a remarkable contrast to those obtaining in any disciplined British service. There could be no doubt of the affection between officers and men ; the fact of their all coming from the same district added to what can only be described as the "family feeling". A man would accost an officer and, after the Roman salute, the conversation would proceed on terms of complete equality ; even an order might produce a long and friendly discussion. Guards posted to mark the portion of the deck reserved for officers lounged about leaning on the bulwarks and chattering with their friends. At recurrent intervals the band would suddenly invade the officers' quarters without any warning, and a line of subalterns roaring with laughter would push back the men who surged after the band. For a minute or two it would look like a football scrimmage as "those behind cried 'forward !' and those in front cried 'back !' "

The band was indeed an unfailing delight, for its performances were apparently entirely spontaneous. Two or three of its members would strike up, others would rush to fetch their instruments, but long before the late comers had arrived a start would have been made. There followed a steeplechase rush round the ship, all running and blowing their hardest, the tune streaming out like the tail of a kite behind them.

The men were nearly all of the splendid stocky, broad-shouldered type of the peasant of Central Italy, and they all looked in magnificent condition and ready for any hardship. The officers were never tired of praising them ; "such good fellows and so well disciplined". I had no reason to doubt it, but Italian and English ideas of discipline differ very

much in externals. I was not surprised, for I had been told this by a friend who had served with the Italian Army in Macedonia and who, despite the difference, had the warmest admiration for the Italian troops.

There could be no doubt about the officers knowing their men well. At Port Said the order was given that sun-helmets must be worn. As we steamed into the Canal the whole of the superstructures in the bows of the ship was covered with hundreds of men; about half a dozen were bare-headed or wearing nothing but what used to be known in the British Army as "forage caps". A centurion of the Legion went on the bridge with a megaphone and repeated the order for sun-helmets; some of those who had climbed into particularly advantageous positions on the tops of derricks became conveniently deaf. But in a moment the officer had ticked them off by name, although he could see nothing but the backs of their heads.


The costumes evolved by the officers for wearing on board ship were remarkable in their variety. Pyjamas, or some combination of pyjamas and uniform, were the most popular—uniform breeches with a pyjama coat or a uniform coat and pyjama legs, but rank badges pinned to the left breast of singlets were perhaps the most surprising sight to English eyes. In these kits they would troop in to mess, the only ceremony observed being that all rose and gave the Roman salute when the *Console*—i.e. the Commandant of the Legion—entered the dining saloon.

The heat of the Red Sea certainly provided an excuse for any costume, or indeed lack of it, but the Red Sea, where there was at least a breeze, "paled its ineffectual fire" before the heat of Massawa. This town stands on the equator and boasts that it is the hottest place in the world. I have no reason to doubt that boast. The coast

of Eritrea is low and sandy, but behind Massawa there is a great range of mountains which were almost grey in the glare of the midday sun when we dropped anchor in the harbour at 2 p.m. on September 23rd. A year ago Massawa was merely a port of call for Italian liners to the Far East and South Africa, and the chief outlet of the trade of the colony, but the total number of sailings in 1934 only totalled 234. Now, as one officer remarked, "it looks like Genoa". The roads and docks were crammed with ships of all sizes, and a flotilla of Italian destroyers lay sweltering in the sun.

At 8 p.m. we entered the inner harbour and the great ship was slowly and delicately edged into her place alongside the quay. There was about a foot to spare, fore and aft, when we tied up.

The disembarkation started immediately. The great brown snake which I had seen winding its way on board at Naples now crept slowly ashore. As each battalion was complete it disappeared into the hot darkness to enter the motor-buses which were to take it to Asmara and beyond. I watched with amazement as the men passed, cheerfully carrying packs which I could not have lifted, but they made little of the weight. The officers inevitably suggested the White Knight in *Alice in Wonderland*, for they were hung round with an immense assortment of objects. In addition to revolvers and daggers they had map-cases (which carried far more than maps), field-glasses, cameras, thermos flasks, and other oddments suggested by personal fancies. Through the stifling night the steady tramp of feet continued ; it was one o'clock in the morning when the last man marched away into the unknown.



## CHAPTER II

### THE SMOKE BLEW TOWARDS ABYSSINIA

THE officers of the Regular Army who were proceeding to Asmara had been told to remain on board the *Biancamano* for the night, as there was no accommodation for them ashore, and the naval officer in command very kindly asked me to do the same. At 4.30 a.m. we paraded to see our gear ashore. There is one characteristic of the Italians for which I have the most profound admiration and envy—their total indifference to breakfast. Dinner the night before had been at 6 p.m., but everyone started cheerfully for the station without a thought of breakfast. It must be confessed that mine consisted of a peach and a small quantity of brandy consumed as the train was climbing the pass 8000 feet above sea-level. It was a meal reminiscent of a “Ouida” hero, but it was the only food available, and the change of altitude is an affair to be treated with respect.

The half-mile from the ship to the station was all that I saw of Massawa. I had been told that it was a fine modern town. It had indeed been entirely rebuilt after the terrible earthquake of 1921. Certainly the offices and warehouses in the docks were handsome and suitable for the climate; the rest of the town I was prepared to take on trust, for in common with everyone else who lands at Massawa, my one preoccupation was to leave it as soon as possible.

Despite its climate Massawa has always been the centre of trade between north-east Africa and Arabia, for it has



the one sheltered harbour on the Red Sea, and the development of the port after the earthquake was carried out with the expectation of an increase of traffic in the future. Although the works are not yet finished it was fortunate that so much had been accomplished, for by the spring of 1935 its resources were subjected to a strain which had never been foreseen.

I had sufficient time and energy to observe the order that prevailed. Men and stores were obviously being handled rapidly and efficiently, and there was nothing to suggest that the port was congested ; conditions had clearly changed since the beginning of the year.

This very hasty and superficial impression was confirmed by the study of an official report prepared by the Italian Army Service Corps of their activities between March 16, 1935, and July 16, 1935. When the A.S.C. took over in March there only existed what they described as "the very modest peace organization of the port". They were called on to provide for the disembarkation of a quarter of a million men, and all the stores, arms, and general impedimenta needed by a modern army which had to be maintained in a country destitute of all supplies.

It must be remembered, in addition, that everything needed for the improvement of the docks and the building of hundreds of miles of new roads had also to be brought from Italy. Wharfs had to be constructed or enlarged, or rendered safe for the landing of petrol and explosives. There was no accommodation for troops or supplies and this had to be built immediately ; the new station had to be finished and fresh railway lines laid in the docks ; a road had to be made connecting the outer and the inner harbour ; telephones and electric-light wires had to be laid by the mile ; warehouses had to be built, each adapted to

the stores it was to contain ; most difficult of all, the problem of the supply of water for men and animals had to be solved.

The first and greatest task was to clear the ground of the mountains of supplies that had accumulated, and which had to be got away by the single line of railway only capable of handling 200 tons of goods a day, while the dumps ran into thousands of tons. By the middle of June 200,000 tons of stores had been dealt with, and by the middle of July the amount had risen to over 400,000 tons. New rolling stock had been imported, the single line had been duplicated in many places, a system of signalling installed. The railway had been supplemented by lorries and camel caravans, and the A.S.C. was able to report by the middle of July that "the situation was well in hand" and the congestion at an end. An astonishing feat when it is remembered that it was carried out with no lull in the disembarkation of troops and stores, and that it was all done by Europeans working under a tropical sun. The local inhabitants have a rooted objection to manual labour and confined their energies to looking on ; after walking half a mile to the station I sympathized with the Eritreans.

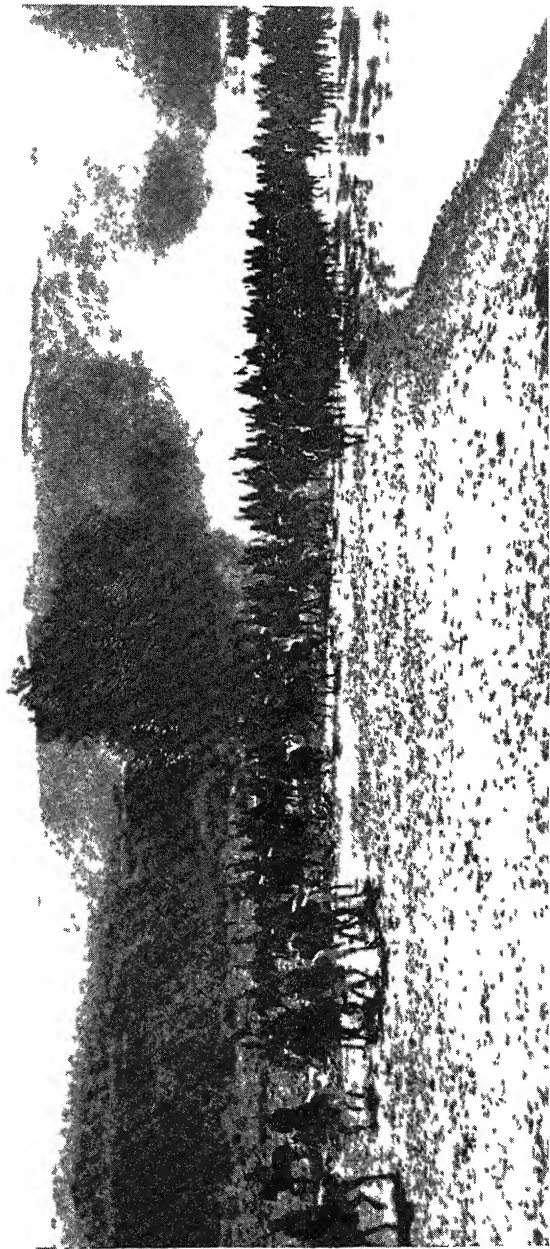
We found the most modern single-coach motor train awaiting us ; this climbs the 8000 feet in three hours instead of the six of the steam train. The coach bears the strongest resemblance to the one which runs from Paddington to the outer suburbs, and it seemed strange to meet one of the family in Central Africa. The line which runs from Massawa to Asmara on the great tableland above was one of the finest examples of Italian railway engineering. For the first few miles the line crosses a desolate sandy waste ; in September this was dotted with supply depots of war materials and hutments for the men at work on the new road. Clad in shorts and sun-helmets, gangs of men from

Sicily and the Veneto were swinging pickaxes, wheeling barrows, levelling sand dunes, or building solid stone bridges over gulleys. They looked well and happy. As a matter of fact, of the Italians who have gone to Eritrea since the beginning of the year—troops and workmen—only seven per thousand have died, or have had to be repatriated through illness.

The railway line left the sandy plain and began to wind in and out of the foothills. Never had I imagined such barren country ; the only sign of life was flocks of little grey and black birds and a brown scrub which looked as dead as the arid soil. At last there was a trace of water in one of the small valleys, and beside it a few native huts. They were miserable affairs, the sides were made of bare branches and the roofs of a rough thatch ; the better ones had mud plastered over the walls. The people were of the negroid type and wore characterless dingy draperies.

Very soon we began to climb in earnest, and the difficulty of looking out of both windows at the same moment became more acute than usual. The shrubs became larger and greener ; the hillsides ran sharply down, scored here and there by long lines of brown earth and rocks, which were watercourses in the rainy season, but there was no water in the narrow gorges and no sign of human habitation. Half-way up the great escarpment of the mountain a valley widens out and here stands the town of Ghinda. There were small, comfortable villas belonging to Italian residents, cultivated fields, and beside the railway line herds of the small local cattle were grazing. There was still no water, but there must be plenty at a certain depth.

One small incident on the way spoke well for the education which Italy is giving her native subjects. We stopped at a tiny wayside station, and one of my friends



NATIVE CAVALRY CROSSING THE MARFB DURING THE ADVANCE



A LIGHT TANK GOES UP TO THE FRONT

from the *Biancamano* put his head out of the window and asked a boy of about fourteen the name of a very handsome flowering tree which was growing beside the line. "I do not know ; it is not a native tree, it was imported from Italy." There was a roar of laughter from his brother officers, but what impressed me was the excellent Italian spoken by the very ragged boy.

At intervals we could see the new road with a ceaseless procession of motor-lorries roaring up it. More gangs of workmen were building bridges, strengthening corners and generally putting finishing touches. Perched appropriately enough on a saddle high up in the mountains was a great mule depot, thousands of which have been imported for the Army. Horses cannot live in the country, except a few which come from Abyssinia, and mules were unknown before the Italian occupation.

Seen from the sea, the mountains rise in wave after wave until across the horizon runs a great flat wall. At last, after innumerable windings and tunnels, we climbed to the top of the wall and could look down on the hills and valleys below us and away to the plain and the sea ; in the white heat there was no line of demarcation between land and water.

Asmara, the capital of the colony, stands near the eastern edge of the plateau within a circle of low hills ; it is over 7000 feet above sea-level, and though it too is practically on the equator, the temperature is little more than half that of Massawa. The sun is warm, but there is a nip in the air, and at night the thermometer falls very nearly to freezing point. The air is so rarefied that newcomers are warned to take life easily for the first few days.

Of all surprising conveyances, I found a victoria with a pair of horses at the station of Asmara. The horses were

about the size of donkeys, but they trotted gallantly up the wide road to the town, and I was deposited at the Press Bureau. Here I was received with the kindest of welcomes, although I was another burden added to its collective shoulders. One understood even more clearly than in Rome the reluctance of the authorities to allow journalists to proceed to Eritrea. Short of letting them sleep in the streets, where was accommodation to be found for them?

Six months ago Asmara boasted a population of a few thousands, today possibly not even the Governor himself could say how many tens of thousands are crammed into the little town or living in cantonments around it. While the Army itself is on or near the frontier, Asmara has all the appearance of a miniature Aldershot, and is filled with the multitude of camp-followers which a modern army needs or attracts. The Press Bureau had settled the thorny question of what to do with the handful of journalists who had been allowed to come to the colony, by building some four-roomed huts in the garden of the local hotel. Certainly great is the power of the Press ; despite the urgent military demands for all the transport available, space had been found to bring out the sections of these very substantial little bungalows. So far so good, but the unfortunate Press Bureau was not at the end of its troubles ; it had got its huts, but the only furniture that had arrived were some most excellent and comfortable beds.

With many apologies I was shown into a charming room furnished exclusively with one of the famous beds ; a chair and a table would arrive in a few days—could I possibly manage for the present ? The floor is, after all, an excellent place to put things, and the problem of washing was solved by the existence of a miniature bathroom with running water. It must be said that the water ran with the

chill of ice and that washing demanded a certain amount of courage. Native "boys" squatted under the eucalyptus trees that surrounded the huts, and when one needed anything one merely put one's head out of the window and called "Hola !"

The Press Bureau itself was housed in the very fine "Casa del Fascio", complete with a writing-room, a post office, and a mess of which the foreign correspondents were made honorary members. There were four of these when I arrived in Asmara on September 24th, one member of the staff of *Il Popolo d'Italia* and some officers on leave from their regiments who were journalists in private life. The Conte Ciano, the Minister for the Press and Propaganda and Signor Mussolini's son-in-law, had rejoined the Air Force and was serving as a captain at the aviation base in Asmara. He retained sufficient interest in his civil avocation to come to the Press Bureau every evening, and always messed with the staff.

When the Italians chose Asmara as the capital of the colony it was a small native village, and this has been left undisturbed except for a certain amount of cleaning and tidying up, and an Italian town of two-storeyed houses with straight asphalted roads has been built beside it.

The Governor's palace stands at one end of the town on a little eminence, and boasts a garden which is the justification of those gardens of the theatre in which all flowers bloom together, regardless of the season. In the palace garden arum lilies, chrysanthemums, dahlias, marguerites, and geraniums were all happily growing and flowering side by side. Indeed, Asmara seems a paradise for flowers ; great purple convolvuluses ramped over every available wall, huge bushes of heliotrope and honeysuckle scented the air—only roses seemed to be missing.



There was no zone of silence, and staff cars and Army lorries roared through the streets hooting relentlessly as they went. The pavements were crowded with all ranks and all branches of the Army, of the National Militia, and of the Ascari, the native troops. I was told that an immense number of natives from the outlying districts had come to live in the town. They looked cheerful and well fed; probably they were all making their fortunes by selling anything and everything that they possessed to the authorities. Occasionally a minor chief would pass by mounted on a fine donkey, with his followers running before and behind him; chattering groups of women, many with babies on their backs, would look at one with frank curiosity as they pattered along. They were bundles of white draperies, one piece being left loose to be pulled over the head and across the mouth as a protection against dust. Their style of hairdressing was elaborate and hideous. Their heads were covered with tiny plaits dragged back from the forehead and gathered together on the nape of the neck; so tight are these plaits that the black skin of the head is visible. The whole coiffure is drenched in liquid rancid butter, and it is as well to keep to windward of a group of women.

Practically the whole of the population of the centre of Eritrea belongs to the Coptic Church; the priests' dress differs in no way from that of their flock except that they wear a high black head-dress, which is a cross between a fez and a turban.

The Italians have laid out a market-place between the town and the native village. It seemed to be a centre more for the exchange of gossip than of goods, for the Eritreans have no native arts and crafts. Circles of women sat round odd jumbles of imported goods; the few baskets that were

being plaited were of Italian pattern ; two men in an open booth were busily engaged in hammering potted meat tins into shape—apparently these found a ready sale.

The cattle market has been banished to some waste ground outside the town, and twice a week the country people drive their beasts in for sale to the townsfolk. The Italians have done all they can to improve the local breeds of cattle, sheep, and goats. The cattle are small, dun-coloured animals with a curious hump between their shoulders, and, as I found from experience, are not good eating. The sheep look very much like the European variety and the goats are a fine race. Apparently they are more docile than their European brethren, for they allow themselves to be carried quite peacefully on a man's back with their legs hanging down each side of his neck.

On the top of the highest of the small hills overlooking the town is a small fort built in the early days of the Italian occupation, but it has obviously been "a strong place". Another of the little eminences provided the site for the cantonments of one of the native regiments, but they were empty, as the regiment was on the frontier, and it was possible to see the hutments provided as married quarters. These too were empty, as the women accompany the men, being kept, as an Italian officer assured me, well in the rear in the case of fighting. This has been the custom among the local tribes, and the Italians very wisely have not interfered with it. The huts are laid out in lines with military precision and present the appearance of gigantic beehives ; for about four feet from the ground there are thick walls of red stone, and above that they are thatched. The petty officer in charge of the cantonment paraded his family to be introduced. One small girl of about six was wearing a necklace from which hung five Maria Theresa dollars, and

we were proudly informed that she was already engaged to be married. Obviously she was one of the regimental heiresses.

September 28th is the great festival of the Coptic Church; it is the day of the Holy Cross, but it is many other things besides, like other Churches, the Copts superimposed a Christian on a pagan festival. The "Meschel" marked the end of the great summer rains which make the whole of East Africa impassable for months; it was the day on which the tribesmen were called together; the day on which the armies of the kings and chiefs were mobilized; the day of the glorification of war and of the warrior. In Eritrea the Italians have added another ceremony, for it is the day on which honours are bestowed on the chiefs who have deserved well of the State.

The celebrations begin on the evening of the 27th with a great torchlight procession, for fire and war were closely intermingled in the pagan rites. Outside the town the Ascari who were still in Asmara, local chiefs and their followers, and apparently all the male inhabitants were marshalled. Each man carried a torch composed of bundles of twigs bound together with grass rope; these torches were about ten inches in circumference and about four or five feet long. The wide flights of steps leading up to the terrace in front of the military headquarters made an excellent grand stand, and were crowded with the Italian authorities and the officers of the garrison. Below there was a gravel sweep, beyond that a strip of grass and then the road.

As darkness fell a bugle-call announced the arrival of the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Africa, de Bono. It was the first time that I had seen the man whose name is so famous in modern Italy. He was an

Army officer of high rank when he threw in his lot with the Fascists in the troublous days of 1921 and 1922; he had been one of the "Four" who had organized the march on Rome; he had been Governor of Italy's North African colonies, Minister for the Colonies, and in September 1935, and next to Signor Mussolini himself, bore the heaviest weight of responsibility. I saw a short, spare man with a bronzed face, only his white beard and moustache differentiating him from many a British general who had seen service in India.

Suddenly in the darkness there arose cries of "*Hoi!*", and the procession began. The Ascari advanced four and five abreast with a curious dancing step, dashing their flaming torches on the ground till the road was covered with flaming twigs, for it is both fortunate and a sign of courage to tread on fire. (It must be remembered that the natives go barefooted.) Some of the detachments were led by men beating drums or blowing great wooden pipes and dancing as they went. The shrill cries never ceased, but took a fresh rhythm from the drums. Then came the native chiefs on their donkeys with their escorts, finally a group of women in their white draperies. These last broke away from the procession on to the gravel sweep below the steps.

They formed a ring, and, to the music of three or four of the great wooden pipes and a drum, performed a ceremonial dance. Three or four in coloured draperies leaped and whirled in the middle of the circle, while one of them held above her head an enormous conical hat covered with green, gold, and silver embroidery. The tune consisted of one simple phrase repeated over and over again. The only incongruous touch was the large electric lamp carried on the head of one woman to light up the scene. The last torch wound away into the town, the cries died away in

the distance, the maddening rhythm of the drums stopped, the bugle-call marked the General's departure, and we went home to prepare for the great ceremony next day.

On a plain outside the town a circle about a mile in circumference had been roped off, and a small platform had been erected for the Governor. In the centre of the circle was an enormous unlighted bonfire surrounded by a ring of Coptic priests in vestments which were every colour of the rainbow and sparkled with gold and silver. Companies of Ascari took up their positions near the bonfire, while the chiefs in their tight white trousers and long black satin cloaks with gold and silver lace were ranged in groups round the platform. At last the usual bugle-call announced the arrival of the Governor with his Ascari escort mounted on small grey Arabs.

I had been very kindly asked to view the proceedings from the Governor's stand, but for the first time in my life I was able to achieve my ambition of seeing a ceremony as a Press photographer (the person who has always the best view), and I was allowed to roam at large over the parade ground. Leaning against the rope close to the stand was an old native, his breast covered with medals; the Italian officer, with whom I was, stopped and spoke to him. He was a retired petty officer of the Ascari, four times decorated for bravery in the field and a veteran of Adowa. He made me think of those native non-commissioned officers in India who had stood faithful to their British officers in the black days of the Mutiny.

The proceedings began with the presentation of medals to the more important chiefs. We were too far off to hear the prayers which the Coptic priests were saying over the bonfire, but suddenly there was a cry as the smoke and flames began to shoot up.

"If it burns well," explained my friend, who is an officer in an Ascari regiment, "it means that there will be a good war, and from the direction of the smoke you can tell where the war will be. That smoke is blowing towards Abyssinia. Usually there are hundreds of Ascari at this ceremony, today they are all on the frontier ; you should see this ceremony when they are all here."

I felt that there was more than I could possibly see and take in as it was. Beside me was Signor Pavolini, a distinguished member of the Fascist Party whom I had known in Florence. High rank in the Party was no road to a "cushy" job in East Africa, and he was disguised as a humble lieutenant in the Air Force. I laughed afterwards as I thought of the way in which we had stood beside that Ascari officer with our mouths open like young birds while he fed us with information.

The Ascari had now broken ranks and were dancing round the fire, those who had scimitars or spears, as well as rifles, plunging them into the flames. This brings good luck in battle. Meanwhile there was an incessant fusillade of blank cartridges and drums were beaten frantically. The flames died down, the non-commissioned officers blew their whistles, and the companies re-formed.

The uniforms of the native regiments differ considerably, but the usual kit is light-brown drill with a very high red fez and a broad red sash. Over this, in certain companies, there were a few men who wore short cloaks with long points all embroidered in silk with representations of lions ; some carried spears, others brandished their scimitars. The company belonging to the Air Force carried silver shields with aeroplanes painted on them in black. Another company wore brilliant green-and-yellow silk scarves round their fezes, the ends fluttering in the breeze ; a few men had

beautifully embossed round shields. But for the rifles slung on their backs and the discipline which prevailed amid apparent confusion, the sight seemed to have as little to do with modern war as the breastplates of the Household Brigade; it was an East African version of the Military Tournament.

Now began the most curious part of the ceremony. Each company in turn advanced towards the Governor's stand and gave what can only be described as a war dance. First came a company who carried bags of corn, spades, and forks. They scattered the corn on the ground and brandished their spades and forks above their heads, obviously inspired by some fertility rite. The largest company on parade boasted a band with European instruments, who played a native melody of the usual single phrase over and over again. It also had a line of small boys on either flank, dressed in black waistcoats and white baggy shorts, with haloes of tow round their shaven heads. Armed with spears and scimitars, about twenty men formed a large circle while half a dozen performed a dance which symbolized a lion hunt. All the time the boys hopped and ducked in rhythm with the music, and the remainder of the company hopped and shouted. They then advanced quite close to the Governor's stand and performed a more ceremonial dance. To our astonishment we suddenly saw a woman taking part. There were breathless inquiries as to who she was, and why she was there. We were informed that she was the head of all the "ladies of the town", with very extensive powers, and that it was her traditional right to take part in this ceremony. With this—to our minds—remarkable climax, the dances came to an end.

The Coptic priests who had been looking on from a distance were now invited to approach the Governor's stand, and one was able to study their vestments, which I

was told are based on those of the High Priest, a reminiscence of the Queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon. The chief dignitaries had black or red umbrellas with silver ornaments held over their heads, while the lesser fry were content with green and yellow cotton, or even a European parasol. The lesser chiefs and non-commissioned officers who were to have certificates conferring titles on them as a reward for good service were drawn up in front of the Governor and stepped forward as their names were called, giving the Fascist salute.

When this was at an end the Governor made a short and soldierly speech, which was translated phrase by phrase. The diplomas which had just been conferred upon them were a recognition of loyal service in the past, and meant a fresh responsibility for the future. He called on every man to do his duty in the difficult days through which the colony was passing. "Long live the King! Long live the Duce!" Everyone saluted and the ceremony was at an end.

The rest of the day was given up to what the Eritreans evidently regard as gaiety. Parties of children and even women paraded the streets with bits of bright silk over their white draperies and beat drums unceasingly.

But the "Meschel" was over: had the smoke spoken truly? Would there be war with Abyssinia before the next "Meschel"?

It was a curious life in Asmara in September of 1935. Except for very uninformative news bulletins one was entirely cut off from the rest of the world. One heard vaguely of committees that met and dissolved in Geneva without finding any way out of the *impasse*. There was much to interest a stranger in a very strange land, but one's interest was superficial, for all the time one was waiting and wondering.



## CHAPTER III

### WITH THE TROOPS ON THE FRONTIER

To deal adequately with the experiences and impressions of the two following days one would have needed to have been an agricultural authority, an ornithologist, a botanist, a geologist, and a military expert, alternately and simultaneously. At 7 a.m. on September 29th two American journalists, a Polish journalist, a member of the staff of the Ufficio Stampa, and I left in two motor-cars to visit the troops on the frontier. The road ran for about ten miles across the Asmara plateau, past the great aviation camp and strips of cultivated land where corn and oats were being grown. It then began to plunge down one of the great gorges which ran into the plain. Here and there a native village of huts, with undressed stone walls and flat brown thatched roofs, clung to the side of one of the low hills ; cacti with their beautiful candelabra of golden and crimson flowers, great plants of yellow daisies, and some purple flowers brightened the banks of the road.

The whole way from Asmara to the southern frontier the land slopes down, sometimes sharply, sometimes gradually, to the basin of the Mareb river, beyond which is Abyssinia. The whole country is broken up by deep gorges, wide valleys, tablelands and hills, some high and steep, some little more than large mounds. There is plenty of water under the soil, though the streams, which appear and disappear, were at this season little more than trickles with here and there a shallow pool. There were small

patches of crops, mostly Indian corn of a variety known locally as "dura", which is grown by the natives as it gives them the least trouble to produce.

The first soldiers whom we saw were a Legion of Black Shirts camped on a hillside over a stream, their small tents with their dark-green and purple camouflage being almost invisible against the brown earth. It was Sunday, so the banks of the little river were covered with men washing themselves and their clothes, while the barber was busily at work in the shelter of the bridge. Small military posts and some deserted hutments were dotted along the roadside; the latter had housed the men who had made the road, but there was nothing more to be done in this region and they had moved off elsewhere.

Adi Ugri is forty miles south of Asmara, and was at this time the headquarters of the Gavinana Division, the first division of Italian troops to land in Eritrea. It is a charmingly situated little village, lying in the cup of some low hills; the highest of these was circled by the red walls of a fort, while the flat summit of another provided the site for the divisional headquarters. The offices were substantial one-storey buildings, and the staff lived in large tents or the beehive huts vacated by a regiment of Ascari.

Here we dumped our luggage, as we were to return to sleep at headquarters, and picked up our staff officer who was to be our guide for the day. We hurried on, as our objective was the line of the frontier, and climbing over a low stony ridge, with troops encamped on either side of the road, came to another and smaller native village, Adi Qualà, which was a brigade headquarters. There was a short stop while enthusiastic photographers ran about with cameras taking pictures of the small booths set up under the trees by the roadside, and it was possible to have a talk

with some of the Italian soldiers who were standing about, and to hear their views of life in Eritrea. They were mostly peasants from the Abruzzi, and consequently much interested in the agricultural possibilities of the country.

"It is a good country," they said, "wonderful soil, you could grow anything here ; the only thing that is wrong with Eritrea is the population ; these natives won't work ; what this country needs is hundreds of Italian peasants, then you would see what we would make of it. The climate is good here ; we are all in the best of health."

"Do you not find life rather dull and monotonous ?" was my very bromidic question, but I wanted to find out how the troops were feeling.

"We are waiting, of course, all the time ; it does seem long, but we are ready"—this with a flash in the eye—"when the order comes for the advance. There is a great deal of work to do ; we are still improving the roads, laying telegraph wires ; there are a hundred jobs to keep us busy all day."

"But in the evenings ?"

"Yes, they are rather dull, but we sing, and some of the men can play, and we write letters, and after all we work so hard all day that we are glad to go to sleep."

They were a happy, cheerful crowd, accustomed to the hard life of the Italian peasant ; they were obviously well fed and cared for and did not miss what they had never had—the amusements to which a British soldier is accustomed. There were canteens where they could buy what they needed in the way of small extra comforts, but the Italian Army does not provide "club-rooms" or any form of entertainment for the men. In all the camps which I passed there was not a pair of goal-posts, nor did I see one man kicking a ball about. Any spare energies seem to be

devoted to the making of gardens, or where on the hill-tops there is no water for flowers and vegetables, ingenious patterns are made with stones to decorate the dusty soil.

We were now joined by another officer whose official task appeared to be that of a captain in the Army Service Corps, but who was, in fact, the man who had created the brigade base at Adi Qualà. There was no time at that moment to see his handiwork, as we were bound for the advance post which looks out over the wide valley of the river Mareb. There is an excellent road which leads down to the ford, but as one can, of course, see nothing from that low level, we were taken to the edge of the great bastion which commands the valley and looks away to the range of the Abyssinian mountains. We now took to a caravan route, and down in a little valley one of the cars was bogged, but fortunately some Italian workmen were busy in a small quarry near by and came to the rescue. It was strange to see the ordinary wild flowers of the English countryside growing on the edge of the marshy ground.

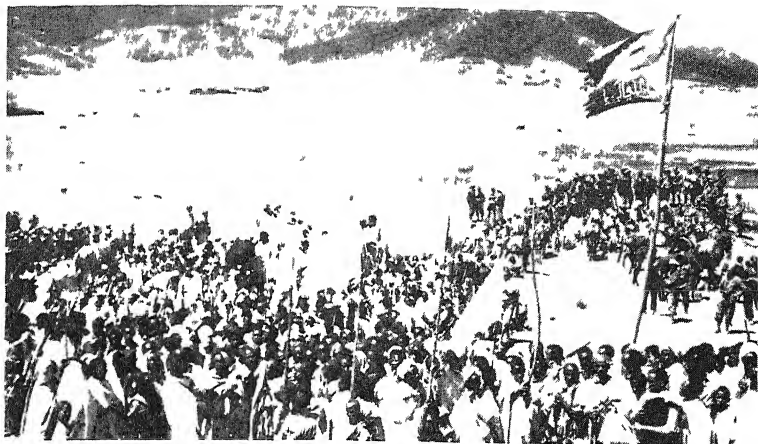
The track wound up the back of a hill and led to a small plateau on which stands a great monolith erected in honour of the men who died at Adowa. The land has been levelled and low stone posts connected by iron chains edge the cliff, which falls steeply away to the river Mareb and the frontier. Beyond stretched the great line of mountains which protect the hinterland of Abyssinia, and we could see the pass below the curiously shaped peak which stands over the plain of Adowa. It was on this plain that the Italians suffered defeat in 1896, and the name occupies that place in Italian military history which Majuba does in British military history. Indeed, with a change of names the story might be that of many a

colonial expedition in which British soldiers paid with their lives for the blunders of politicians and for an underestimate of the forces of the enemy.

The Cabinet in Rome "needed" a victory, and telegraphed to the General in command urging him to attack. He had 16,000 Italians and 6700 natives under his command, while Menelik, the Emperor of Abyssinia, had about 100,000 men. General Baratieri's plan of dividing his forces into three columns for the attack may have been excellent on paper, but was fatal in practice. For success it depended on extreme rapidity of movement and absolute synchronization of the arrival of the forces at the three points from which the attack was to be made. One column lost its way in the mountain defiles, another by mistake advanced too far, and as a result the Abyssinians were able to overwhelm each at their leisure.

Five thousand Italians, including Generals Arimondi and Damormida, were killed, 500 were wounded, and 1700 taken prisoners. How desperate a resistance they made is shown by the fact that the Abyssinian losses were about 7000 killed and 10,000 wounded.

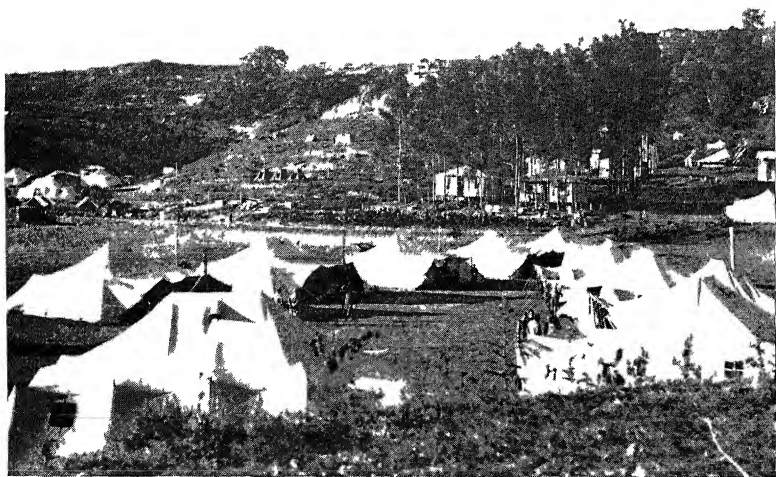
It was a defeat of which no nation would need to be ashamed. The larger part of General Baratieri's men had been campaigning for months in a tropical climate against overwhelming forces; they were short of food and clothing; the reinforcements which had arrived from Italy were sent straight up to the front line in uniforms which had belonged to the Army of Piedmont before the unification of the kingdom; on the day of the battle itself they had been marching for hours, carrying and dragging their artillery over the mountain passes. But the Abyssinians were, and are, too ignorant to take these factors into account, and ever since the day of



*Top.* MOHAMMEDAN PRIESTS AT ADIGRAT

*Centre.* GENERAL DE BONO PROCLAIMING RAS GUGSA

*Bottom.* THE FORT AT ADIGRAT WITH THE PORTRAIT OF SIGNOR MUSSOLINI



*Above* VILLAGERS ARRIVING FOR THE CEREMONY AT ADIGRAT  
*Below.* G H Q UNDER THE TREES AT ADIGRAT, NOVEMBER 1935

Adowa they have despised the Italian Army, a fact which has had a considerable effect on their attitude towards Italy. A primitive and warlike people judges other nations entirely by their success on the field of battle.

Italy, and particularly Fascist Italy, has not forgotten Adowa. It is determined that such mistakes shall not be made again, and many of the officers to whom I talked said proudly, "Look at the way in which we are equipped, and think of the way in which those poor fellows suffered who fought at Adowa."

Below the monolith a staircase leads down through the rock to the vault in which lie the bodies of General Arimondi and General Damormida, a fitting resting-place for two brave soldiers.

A battery of artillery was occupying the position, and we were invited to see their observation post which had been hollowed out of the face of the cliff. The valley below was broken by undulating ground to the right, but to the left the plain was absolutely level and one could follow the line of the river. The mountains filled the whole of the horizon, some of them wild rugged peaks, others seemed to run sheer up to long level summits. Beyond lay the Tigrai, one of the richest provinces of Abyssinia, which was conquered by Menelik.

A move was made to the officers' mess. Only those who have motored for hours under an African sun can know how delicious a glass of mineral water can be! The officers laughed when they heard of our being stuck in the swamp. "But," they said, "it is a magnificent road now; you should have been here during the past few months when there were the rains, then it was so bad that even the mules could not get through on some days. Of course," they added hastily, lest we should think



poorly of the roads which have been built in the colony, "you will understand that this road only leads to this post; you should see the one which goes down to the frontier."

On our return journey we once again stuck for a few moments in the marsh, and great was the indignation of the officer from Adi Qualà. "It is perfectly easy to drive here; my men would never think of letting such a thing happen," he informed the very efficient chauffeurs, who were not, however, accustomed to cross-country driving.

Back at Adi Qualà there was a little time to see the transformation which had taken place. Six weeks before it had consisted of a native village of about 500 people; it was, however, quite an important place from the Eritrean point of view, as it was the first stop for caravans after they had crossed the frontier, consequently there was a row of stone-built single-roomed houses on one side of the road.

"Yes," said our host, "those and a sea of mud were all I found when I got here six weeks ago; you can see the rest for yourselves."

What was immediately visible was a good road, a small piazza paved with granite setts, with a garden of flowering cacti, and neat rows of buildings on three sides. The officer himself had a comfortable little office with a bedroom opening out of it; there were excellent barracks for the Carabinieri across the top of the square, while on the third side were the mess, the kitchen, and other offices. The furniture had all been made out of empty packing-cases; even the table in the mess had been lengthened to meet the needs of the party who had descended like a horde of very hungry locusts.

"Naturally you can only see," said our host, "a very small part of what has been done; we have had to set up and equip the whole of the brigade headquarters; dig six wells, make a reservoir, provide accommodation for tons of stores, wire the whole place for electric light, and generally make life possible for men and animals. And," he added proudly, "my men have done the whole thing." Apparently town-planning, building, carpentering, drainage, electric-light installations, with a little gardening to fill in odd moments, all come within the scope of the Italian Army Service Corps.

The luncheon was delicious, although an apology was made for the macaroni. "My cook does not come from Naples, so he does not really know how to cook this." It seemed very good to the uneducated foreign palate, and the veal cutlets were the best I have ever tasted. Over luncheon it was possible to get our host to talk of his experiences in the colony.

"I arrived in February," he said, "and was told to organize the port of Massawa. I was handed the keys which belonged to the four military safes and told to get on with the job." (I thought of the official report which I had seen, and realized that here was the man who had done much of the work.) "After three months I was sent off down to the Dancalia frontier to construct a line of small forts, and after that I was ordered to raise and train three native regiments—that was very interesting. After that" (he spoke with slight regret in his voice) "the Army Service Corps asked for me back."

I was not altogether surprised when I thought of what I had seen.

A question as to the colony itself absolutely confirmed what my soldier friends had told me.

"You cannot imagine the richness of the land in this part of the territory. As soon as I got here we planted vegetables, and in three weeks I was eating my own peas. But the natives won't work. The only fitting occupation for a man is fighting. Our Ascari are splendid soldiers, but if you tell a man to move two stones he takes all day to do it. Of course, the country needs Italian agriculturists, for it could support a big population. It would cure the native, too, of the idea that only slaves work. And you have so much that you need—splendid building stone, quantities of iron, and no need to mine it, for it sticks out of the hillside. In the south I've seen gold in the rivers"—he proceeded to give details to show how rich the deposits were, but, never having been a gold-miner, the information, unfortunately, went over my head.

I told him of the most lovely bird that I had seen during the drive; it was about the size of a big sparrow and bright scarlet.

"You are very lucky to have seen it. In the mating season the birds are beautiful, they are every colour of the rainbow, but now they are beginning to moult and their winter plumage is mostly grey and white. This whole country is full of birds."

It would sound from this report of his conversation as if our host had monopolized the conversation and delivered a monologue; it was obviously far from being his wish to do so, but one plied him with questions, for he was a man who had used both his eyes and his brains ever since he had been in the colony.

After lunch he took us up to a section of the village which stood on the top of a small rise. There was a high hedge round it and beehive huts within; beside it was the new reservoir which this officer had just constructed

and which was clearly very dear to his heart. Just beyond was a Coptic church which had been built comparatively recently. There was a high wall with a sort of gatehouse porch in which some natives appeared to be camping; I imagine that they were a local family of beggars. Within the outer wall was a grass-plot with some trees and a dilapidated belfry detached from the church. The outer wall of the church had four wooden doors up a short flight of steep steps, the walls being pierced with windows very high up. Within this there was a passage that ran the whole way round; two more steps led to another passage, and within again was a square building with walls that went up to the roof. The four doors of this were locked, and we were told that only the priests were allowed to enter.

The whole of the walls, which must have been quite twenty feet in height by about twenty in breadth, were covered with pictures in the most brilliant colourings; they varied in size from about four feet square to about three feet square, while others were oblong. They were full of life and vigour, entirely in the traditional style, with a certain Byzantine influence. They represented scenes from the Old and New Testament and from the lives of the Saints. Perhaps the most interesting of all these panels was one showing four Italian generals who had served in the colony; they were represented in uniform and on horseback, slightly but not very highly stylized. Their names were written in Amharic characters beside each figure. One thought how surprised the generals would have been to find themselves represented as saints of the Coptic Church; it was a fine tribute to the relations which must have existed between them and their men.

The crossbeams, which ran from the four corners of the inner building to the outer walls, were also painted in brilliant colours, while the roof was lined with plaited straw which had been dyed to match. One would have liked to know more of the artist. Curiously enough, we saw four coloured cartoons decorating the mess of the First Group of Black Shirts, which we visited the next day, which might well have been by the same man. Unfortunately, the officers could tell us nothing except that these had been bought in Asmara.

On our return to our host's quarters he asked us if we would like to see some of the Abyssinians from the Tigrai province who had slipped across the frontier and who were being detained at the Carabinieri headquarters. We naturally said that we should be much interested, and a dozen men were lined up for us to talk to. They were totally indistinguishable from the local population, and an interpreter being produced we set to work to ask them questions. The answers shattered my idea that every man in the countryside was a born warrior.

They were peasants; why had they come across the frontier? Because they had something to sell. In Abyssinia the chiefs took everything and never paid for it; if the Italian Government took anything, it paid for it. Were there many soldiers in the Tigrai province? Not that they had seen; one gathered that the last thing that they wanted to see were soldiers.

They are not allowed to stay on the Italian side of the frontier, but despite all the efforts of the Abyssinian authorities the peasants are incessantly slipping across to sell a pound of butter or a few eggs. No doubt they are useful to the military intelligence department. The sergeant of the Carabinieri who was in charge of them confided to

me: "They like us very much in the Tigrai, they hope that we will come soon." Time alone can show if he was right in his opinion.

We now turned our faces north again to Adi Ugri, but on the way we had to stop to visit the regiment of our young staff officer. Here were real war conditions. The camp was on the top of a ridge, and the bare stony ground would have been a quagmire in wet weather; indeed, it had proved so, and small trenches had been made in all directions. One of the officers, who belonged to the same company as our guide, apologized that nothing had been done to beautify the camp. "But, you see, we only came here ten days ago and we expected to move on again at any minute. We came out with the first division to be landed in Eritrea, and I wish you had seen our camp; I had such a good garden of vegetables. First of all I supplied our mess, then the brigade headquarters, and finally divisional headquarters."

Their hospitality was again unbounded; they insisted and succeeded in cramming us all into one small tent meant to hold four, and made us drink their precious mineral water or liqueurs, whichever we preferred. It was touching to see the home-sickness of our young guide. "It is very grand and all that to be at H.Q., but I do wish I was back with the regiment."

We had time to see something of Adi Ugri before darkness fell. It is, from the native point of view, an important commercial centre, as it is on the caravan routes and in the middle of a rich district. The residence of the Italian Commissioner for the province stands on the top of a small rise, with a beautiful terraced garden in front of it, and looks down on the wide market-place, with its row of acacias and substantially built native shops

on either side. The authorities have made an experimental garden at Adi Ugri for the production of vegetables, which are entirely lacking in the country. Altogether, with the bright gardens of the villas of a few Italian residents, Adi Ugri looked a thoroughly prosperous and cheerful little place.

We were received by General Maravigna in command of the 2nd Army Corps, which was the first to land in Eritrea in February 1935, and now held the whole of this section of the frontier. General Maravigna is a small, spare man with a distinguished military record; he had been one of those to negotiate the Armistice between Italy and Austria-Hungary, had been professor of military history at the Italian Staff College, and is the author of many books on military subjects. He gave us a kind and friendly welcome, but it was a moment in which it was difficult to think of tactful questions to ask the General in command of the division on the frontier. We told him how much impressed we had been with the spirit of the troops, and he agreed that it was excellent. "But," he said, "you must remember that it is not only the spirit of my men, it is the spirit of the whole of Italy today, and my soldiers know that they have the country behind them."

The conversation then turned on the weather, which is not simply a matter for small talk but a question of first-class military importance in East Africa. "You can have no idea of what the rains meant here," said the General; "whatever we did in the morning seemed to be washed away in the afternoon; now they are over in this part of the country and we have been able to finish the roads. The rains have been abnormally heavy and late in Abyssinia this year; only two days ago there was a tremendous storm and the Mareb rose several feet in

an hour ; it should by this time have fallen to its winter level and be easily fordable."

So far as the General's information went there were no important concentrations of Abyssinian troops close to the other side of the frontier ; the land immediately across the Mareb is low-lying and unhealthy, and any men that were there would be kept on the high ground ; also, as the Abyssinian Army is composed of local levies led by their respective chiefs, these tend to coalesce or dissolve from day to day, and change their quarters in search of provisions.

We were entertained to an excellent dinner that night at the headquarters mess. Among those on the staff was the Conte Guicciardini, a member of an old Florentine family and gentleman-in-waiting to the King. He is not a regular soldier or a young man. "We don't know how he got here," said one of the junior officers, "but he was determined to come, and said he did not care what he did." He, too, was typical of the spirit of which the General had been talking.

The next morning we again started at 7 a.m. on our way to a visit to a regiment of native cavalry. For the first few miles our way took us back along the road to Asmara, and then we turned off to the east on to a cross road connecting two of the main roads which run south from Asmara to the frontier. Here we ran into country absolutely unlike anything which we had previously seen. In a valley broken up by little humps, we found fantastic piles of enormous rounded boulders surrounded by the giant euphorbia. These great cacti grow to nearly twenty-nine feet in height ; the trunk is perfectly straight, and about five feet from the ground the branches begin ; they grow out at right angles for a few inches and then perfectly straight



up ; they look like enormous green candles, and the whole effect is that of a monstrous candelabra. They are more curious than beautiful, and seen in conjunction with the great heaps of boulders they made the valley seem a wild and fantastic place to our unaccustomed eyes.

It was the more strange as almost immediately we ran out on to the main road and across a wide, level plain covered with grass. This was the site of a large aerodrome which might have been anywhere in Italy. There were the usual large sheds for stores, officers' quarters with neat gardens, more hangars being built, and a tarred road. I felt that in a few years Eritrea would be developed as a tourist resort with a regular service of aeroplanes from Egypt, and that afternoon trips in *char-à-bancs* would be run to the valley of the euphorbias. I was glad I had seen it before that happened.

We proceeded to headquarters to pick up our guide for the day, only to find that he had been nobbled by the General, so armed with instructions we went on our way. This led us down the sides of a great gorge by a road cut out of the rock. The bends were not only hairpin but hair-raising, and enormous motor-lorries were charging up in a ceaseless stream with a serene consciousness that everybody must, and would, get out of their way. At last the road became less steep, all the motor-lorries appeared to have gone on their business, and we got down among the low hills in the valley of the Mareb.

Here our small adventures began. Nobody knew the exact position of the tiny camp to which we were bound. We turned off the main road and took to what was little more than a mule-track. It wound about over dry gulleys under the low acacia trees of the plain, or up small rises only to tumble down the other side. We met small groups

of Italian soldiers with mules carrying supplies, and stray Ascari, but the first did not know the country and the second as a rule spoke no Italian. We saw in the distance a fort on the top of one of the higher hills and decided that it must be our destination. We climbed up a road like a watercourse, with a gradient that I imagined to be about one in five. On the top we found what seemed to be one of the permanent frontier forts, for it had substantial buildings, with even a short avenue of small trees and the inevitable little garden leading up to the commanding officer's quarters. It was crammed with both Italian and native troops, but it was not our destination; we had come much too far, and must retrace our wheel-tracks and take a road to the right.

We eventually found a wide road, and a few miles down it an Italian regiment in camp. The sentry on the road could not tell us where our fort was. "All I know is," he remarked cheerfully, "if you go much farther you'll be over the frontier." So back we went again, and after further explorations marked down another tiny fort on a hill-top which we had passed many hours previously. We proceeded to climb up, and if the other ascent had been one in five this seemed to me to be about one in two.

As we approached the fort, with about a foot on each side of our wheels and precipices beyond, the engine gave up for a second; the driver shouted at it as if it were a living creature, and the gallant little car responded. In another moment we were on the top, only to be told that the regiment we were looking for were encamped beneath us. We peered over the edge and saw on a lower hill the tents and men waving to us; but for the moment I had had enough of motoring, and thankfully accepted an invitation to follow an Ascari down a goat-track. Our

hosts climbed up to meet us, explaining that they had posted an Ascari on the road to show us the way, but, of course, he was the only man whom we had not asked !

There followed an interlude to which only the pen of Major Yeats-Brown, the author of *Bengal Lancer*, could do justice. Despite all the differences of race and continent I felt as if I were living either in the pages of his book or in one of the stories of Rudyard Kipling. The tiny tent of the officer in command was pitched on the highest point of a stony, irregular hill-top, the higher hill was at our backs, and on the other three sides there stretched the plain covered with acacia trees, isolated or in clumps. Much ingenuity had been shown in preparing for our invasion, and there was shelter and some kind of a seat for everyone. I imagine that every officer's tent had made its contribution. We were admirably waited on by two Ascari, and I saw no need for the apologies which were made for our luncheon. It must not be thought that Italian officers live like sybarites, it is merely that they see no reason why rations should be badly cooked or served, and in this case the native cook had been properly taught.

"It is a bad place for a camp," said the commanding officer, "but it is the only spot in the neighbourhood. There is good grazing for the horses on the plain, and then we can bring them up here for the night ; they die in four or five hours if they are left on the plain at night. No, it is not tsetse fly, it is some kind of a pest. We have not yet discovered what it is ; also the men would get malaria, to which they are very liable. So we live up here. It is bitterly cold at night and a mist covers the plain. The men will throw away parts of any meat that they kill, and the hyenas come and laugh round the camp all

night. No, it is not a good place, but we hope we shan't be here much longer," he said with a cheerful smile.

Other officers who had lunched how and when they could now arrived to join the party and to submit to my fusillade of questions. There was the chorus of praise of their men which you hear from every Italian officer serving with the native troops. (It was any group of British officers in command of native troops talking of their men.)

"They are splendid fellows, born soldiers—but you have to know how to handle them"—this from the commanding officer, who had six years' service with the regiment. "They are desperately proud and you must not offend them. Of course they are all volunteers, they enlist for a year with the choice of going or re-engaging at the end of each year."

"But they all stay on," chimed in another officer. "They are well paid, two lire a day in peace time, with an increase for each year's service, and now they are getting more.

"They are easy to feed, for all that they want is flour; this they mix with a little salt and water, they put a stone inside, make a small round loaf and then bake it in an oven of hot stones. It is very nourishing, but no European teeth could get through it—feel it." A loaf was produced for our inspection and broken with difficulty by the commanding officer. Out fell the stone, but the bread itself seemed to be of about the same consistency. "They get rations as well for their families: so much for their wives and so much for each child."

No wonder that the men stay on for practically their whole lives in the regiment. The non-commissioned officers, with three stripes, had each of them the three stars which denote fifteen years' service.

"All our non-commissioned officers are natives, except for one Italian non-commissioned officer attached to each squadron. There goes one of them now ; he'll be talking to his men in broad Bolognese in a few minutes ; they get on perfectly well, and in some way they understand what he says to them." (This is more than any Italian would do who did not come from Bologna himself, for it is practically a different language.)

"Where do you get your horses ?"

"They all come from Abyssinia, fine, sturdy little animals."

"How long does it take a recruit to learn to ride ?"

"About two months. Yes, they are very good to their horses ; they will dismount and march for miles to save them, and if his horse dies the man is in the most terrible state. We will have a little show for you after lunch, but the regiment is at nothing like full strength as so many of the men have just had anti-typhoid inoculation and are off duty."

"Aren't they afraid of such a mysterious thing ?" I asked.

"No, not a bit ; they have the most touching belief in anything that is done by their officers. Now we will show you something."

I had noticed that the men who had been lounging about when we arrived had been quietly slipping away down the hillside. The commanding officer led us to the edge of the hill and the whole plain was spread out at our feet. The regiment was drawn up away to our left and jingled off, three squadrons of horse followed by the machine-gun detachment on mules. They trotted and then cantered across the plain till they were almost hidden under the acacia trees. There they halted, and single

horsemen began to flit in and out among the trees, advancing gradually towards our hill.

"These are the scouts," explained the commanding officer; "they are seeing that the ground is clear. Here are the men who are going to establish the advance post at the foot of the hill; those little groups are supporting the scouts; the machine-gunners are under that clump of trees. Now the attack is going to begin. This is too much like a cinema show to be true, but if we did it as we should do it in war you would see nothing, and that would not be very amusing."

Things seemed to be happening all over the plain in front of us as men singly and in groups dashed forward from cover to cover, but at the critical moment the attack had to be stopped, for it was discovered that some of the men had worked round on to our right flank and were advancing through a patch of Indian corn. The commanding officer suddenly began to shout orders (the human voice will apparently carry for about half a mile in that atmosphere) and whistles began to blow frantically. "I have been told," he said apologetically, "that the one thing that the men must not do is to trample down that Indian corn, and there they are right in the middle of it!"

The regiment re-formed and swept back across the plain at the gallop, their shrill cries streaming out behind them, the Moslems calling upon Allah and the Copts singing a curious wordless battle-song. "They do that for hours on the march," laughed the Colonel, "till we Italians nearly go mad. Would you like to come down and see the regiment?"

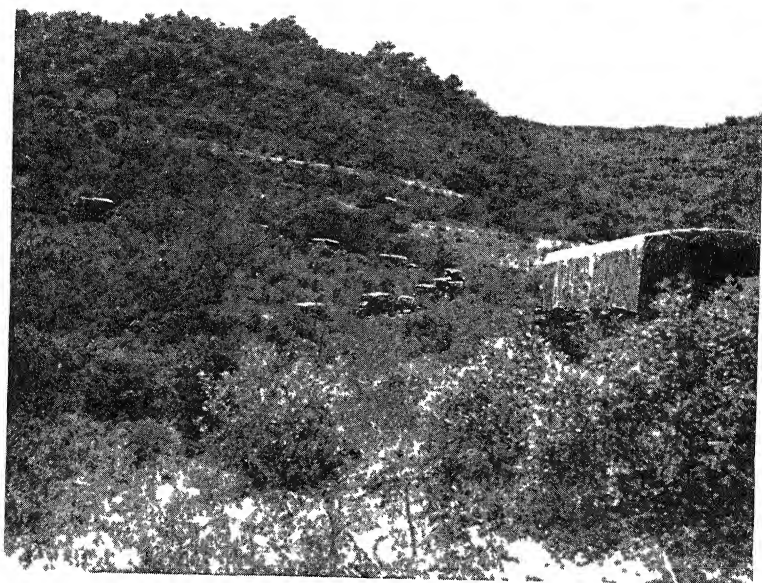
I have frequently admired the films of Italian cavalry officers riding down the sides of precipices; I never imagined that I should be expected to give the mildest

imitation of their feats, but I now discovered that mules had been saddled for us and that I was being invited to ride down the side of the hill. I swung myself into my saddle feeling that at least the mule knew all about it, and discovered that the peak of the army saddle and the rolled-up cloak and blanket and the short leathers gave one a feeling of security. Thanks to the wisdom of my mule, I arrived at the bottom of the descent on his back instead of on my head.

The regiment was drawn up to receive us, the men looking very smart in their brown uniforms, red sashes and red fezes, with a tall falcon's feather standing up at the side. They carried lances, rifles, revolvers, and scimitars, also provisions for two days for themselves and for one day for their horses. The sturdy little Arabs looked in the best of condition, and their grey and chestnut coats glistened in the sun. As they say in Ireland, "It would have made your heart rise to look at them." The word was given to dismount, and men and horses climbed the precipitous side of the hill together like cats. The officers gathered round us to say good-bye, and my last sight of the regiment, as the car bumped away, was of the sentry on the hill-top outlined against the sky.

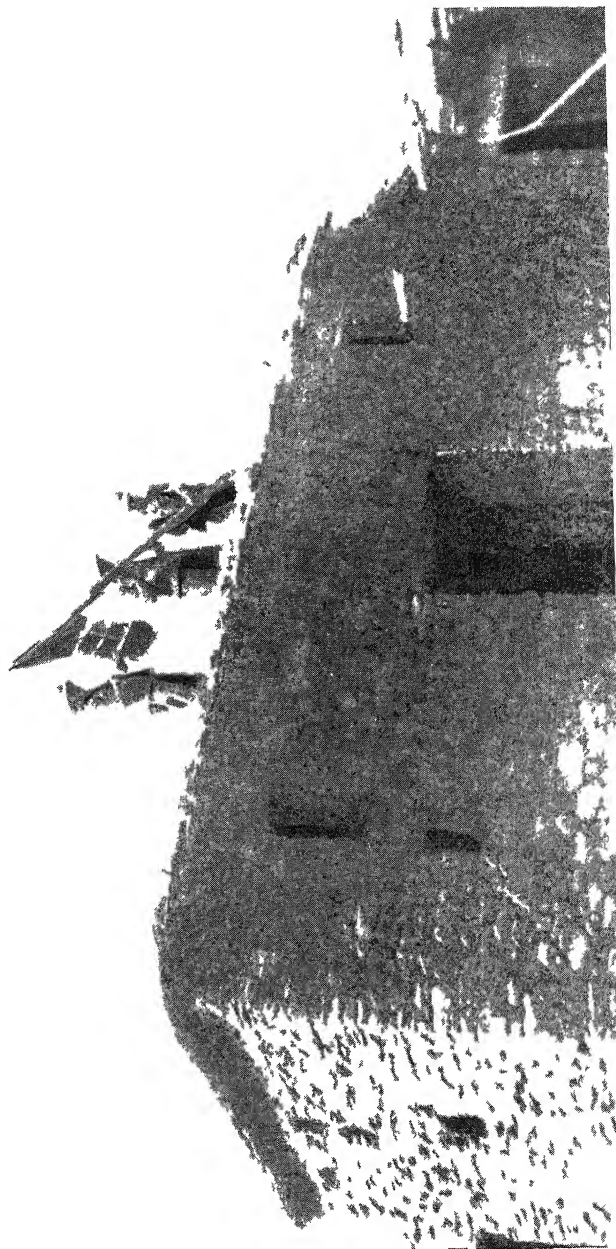
(At this point I was interrupted—why and how will appear in the next chapter. I take up the tale where it was so suddenly broken off.)

We now set out to find a Black Shirt detachment, which was eventually discovered on the top of a mountain. It was not a Legion or a regiment, or anything unoriginal like that, but the "First Group of Black Shirts"; they were, in fact, the first detachment of Fascists to land in Eritrea, and consisted of volunteers from all over Italy, and—an additional source of pride—they supplied the



*Above* MAKING THE ROAD TO ADOWA  
*Below.* A MOTOR CONVOY CREEPING UP





GENERAL VILLA SANTA HOISTING THE FLAG OF THE GAVINANA DIVISION AT THE GHEBI OF RAS SEYUM AT ADOWA

light, fast tank detachment of the Army of Africa. The whole of the mountain-top had been transformed by their energy. The men were under canvas, but the officers had substantial wooden huts and mess-room, while on the highest peak the Brigadier-General in command had had built for himself a comfortable octagonal little house.

One of our hosts gave a lightning and illuminating sketch of the history of the Group. "We got here over six months ago and moved gradually up-country; in May we did a record march of over 200 kilometres. We are attached to the First Native Division, the only white troops in it. Most of our officers and many of our men have seen service in the World War, and some of us were in the fighting squads of the Fascist Revolution, and we like fighting"—the speaker looked like a medieval *condottiere* disguised in khaki.

"But why," he was asked, "have you come and perched yourselves on the top of this high mountain where there is no water?"

"It is a fine site for a camp, nice and near the frontier, and very healthy. The General of the Army Corps just tells us to go into a zone and to do what we like."

Looking at officers and men I could imagine that the General was anxious to provide them with means of working off their superfluous energy. "We have to bring all our water up in motor-lorries from the valley below, but now that is very well organized. When we first got here we were rather short of transport, so our men turned to and carried up every bit of wood for the buildings. Now—well, we are just waiting to start."

Again I felt they would be difficult troops to hold. The native army marches very fast, but the Fascists were obviously determined to give them a lead.

We were now taken to be introduced to the tanks. These hold two men each, and are guaranteed to climb like cats (I was shown a precipice they had been up), and were of the latest pattern. The scene that followed reminded me of a delightful story which my friend Comm. Luigi Villari tells against himself. He is absolutely bi-lingual, and when an English philosopher came to Rome and wished to meet Signor Gentile, Comm. Villari was asked to interpret for them. "I am not a philosopher, and I did not understand what either of them was talking about in either language!"

I now found myself in the same position. I know nothing about tanks, and I suddenly found myself called upon to translate technical details which were poured out by the enthusiastic commanding officer. "Aren't they beauties?" he ended up in a glow of affection. I thought of the Arabs of the native cavalry and found it hard to agree with him; the tanks looked vicious and ugly to me. If I had to fight I should hate to do it in a tin box.

We now turned our faces north towards Asmara, a two hours' run. Dusk was beginning to fall, and we met gangs of men who had been working on the roads trudging back to their quarters. It was an oddly peaceful scene and, indeed, very often one forgot one was in East Africa, one might have been in Umbria or Tuscany. The American correspondents who had seen the roads behind the lines in France were loud in their praises of the work that had been done. "These are not like military roads, these are built to last." And so they are, with their splendid faced-stone embankments and substantial bridges. The Roman Legions were on the march again, and they were driving their roads straight across Africa.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ADVANCE BEGINS

THIS chapter was begun sitting on the sandbag wall of a small fort in the front line of the defences of Eritrea, and was continued in the deserted mess-room of a regiment which was "somewhere in Abyssinia". As I mentioned in my last chapter, a sudden interruption occurred. I was sitting writing in my hut on the evening of October 3rd when I heard the sound of a band and cheering ; I rushed down to the offices of the Press Bureau and just got up the wide steps as the band and a cheering crowd entered the wide street. It was composed of the Italian residents in Asmara, of workmen who were billeted in the town, and of any soldiers who happened to be about. They had commandeered a military band and collected two large flags. They formed a compact mass in front of the Casa del Fascio ; they sang "Giovinezza" over and over again, they cheered for the Duce and shouted for Conte Ciano. He was suddenly discovered on the lower steps and was carried off shoulder high in triumph.

After a visit to the Governor's palace and the headquarters of the military command, the crowd returned to the Casa del Fascio. Conte Ciano was forced to make a speech. He was very brief. He called on every man to do his duty and to be prepared to sacrifice life itself if it were necessary for the safety of Italy. His words were almost drowned in the roars of cheering and in the demands to be led immediately against Abyssinia. I discovered in a few

minutes that it was the occasion on which Signor Mussolini had ordered the mobilization of all Fascists, and that what I had seen was the local demonstration.

For the previous twenty-four hours there had been a feeling of tension in the air. The officers who had been on leave from their regiments and working at the Press Bureau had been saying good-bye and disappearing to unknown destinations; rumours had been flying round among the journalists to the effect that General de Bono had left for the frontier, and that the advance would begin at any moment.

In the middle of dinner that evening we received a message to say that Conte Bosdari, the second-in-command of the Press Bureau, would like to see us all at 9.30. We gulped down our coffee and rushed upstairs to find not only Conte Bosdari but also Conte Ciano, just returning to his Air Squadron. In a moment they were surrounded by journalists clamouring for news. At last Conte Bosdari made himself heard above the din.

"Who would like to leave at one o'clock tonight by car for the frontier? The Italian troops are entering Abyssinia at five o'clock tomorrow morning."

The clamour redoubled itself. Except one journalist, everyone wanted to go.

"Yes, you must bring your beds and tents. I will try to borrow tents for those who have not got them. No, I don't know when we shall be back in Asmara. Yes, you will be able to send telegrams, and a car will go to Asmara every day, so you can return when you like."

Having satisfied themselves on these important points, the journalists then fell on Conte Ciano like a pack of ravening wolves. They bombarded him with questions.

He defended himself, laughing gaily. "You must remember that I am not now the Minister for the Press and Propaganda, I am a captain in the Air Force. I cannot give you an interview. All that I know is that I leave for Abyssinia with my squadron tomorrow at 6 a.m. The Press Bureau has full powers and will tell you what you can and what you cannot do."

We wished him good-bye and good luck, and rushed back to make our preparations. But it so happened that the military authorities at Asmara had announced some days previously that they intended to have a complete "black-out" of the town as a rehearsal for protection against an air raid; and regardless of developments, and of unhappy people trying to pack, they proceeded according to plan. At 10 p.m. every light in Asmara went out and stayed out till 11 p.m. By the light of a candle I searched madly in suit-cases for absolutely indispensable things, and grappled with the problem of packing them in the least possible space. So terrified was everyone of being left behind that we were all ready when the cars arrived at 12.30 a.m. It then became perfectly obvious that it was impossible to cram eight people, their luggage, three typewriters, and their beds and bedding into two small cars. So all the gear, except the indispensable typewriters, was abandoned on the steps of the Press Bureau, to be sent up the next day.

We followed the great road south. There was no traffic except a couple of cars and a small convoy of motor-lorries; there was not a light in the countryside, and not a human being to be seen except a rare sentry with a lantern. We swept on for hour after hour through the silent dark, climbing up and down the mountain sides and past the great camp of the First Group of Black

Shirts which we had visited two days previously—it was silent and deserted now.

I thought of the men with whom I had met and talked ever since I had left Naples ; of the gay enthusiasm of the junior officers of the Legions on board the *Biancamano* ; of the businesslike efficiency of the officers of the Regular Army ; of the warlike bearing of the native cavalry ; of the fierce determination of the First Group of Black Shirts. They were all on the frontier tonight, waiting for zero hour. I knew that they were happy and contented, but I thought, too, of all that war costs in human lives and suffering, of its glory and its misery. I attempted once again the useless effort of defining one's own mental attitude towards war—of reconciling the points of view of the young gentlemen at Oxford who announced that they would not fight for King and country, and of the men who believe that physical death is a small thing, that life is a thing to be lived with gaiety and daring, and that courage on the field of battle is the ultimate test of character. I arrived at the usual bromidic conclusion that war is both good and bad ; that as a woman one must hate and dread it, while one's heart is with the men who fight.

The drive was like a thing in a dream. We reached some deserted hutments, paused for a few moments to drink some coffee, and then climbed to a small fort from which we should be able to see the low-lying land of the frontier. It was nearly 6 a.m., and never again shall I believe that dawn comes quickly in the tropics. The moments dragged by. Very slowly the hills to the east became outlined on the horizon, but the valley below us was a sea of blue mist. The wind swept coldly across the small platform, and the officers of the fort and the tiny

group of civilians stood about muffled up to the eyes. Three cars arrived and half a dozen officers got out; it was the Commander-in-Chief and his staff.

The feeling of tension increased; people spoke in whispers; zero hour was passed; the war had begun; the troops had crossed the frontier. What was happening in the dim valley below? At last the sun climbed over the flat top of the eastern ridge and we moved and spoke more freely. The mist cleared slowly from the plain, and the officer in command of the fort explained the configuration of the country and the routes by which the three advances were to take place. There was nothing to be seen except the wide plain and the mountains of Abyssinia beyond, but here for the time being was general headquarters, here the Commander-in-Chief was awaiting the news of the success or failure of his plans.

General de Bono asked to be introduced to the foreigners present, and spoke a friendly word to each; he even found time to remember that I had brought a letter of introduction to him and reproached me for not going to see him. I explained that I had hardly liked to force myself at such a moment on the man who combined the offices of Governor and Commander-in-Chief.

We settled down to wait, studying the maps pinned to two rough tables. First the minutes and then the hours dragged by. I came to the conclusion that nothing should I hate so much as to be a Commander-in-Chief in a modern war; to wait hour after hour far beyond one's men, to know nothing of what was happening, to be obliged to leave the action and the danger to others. The chief of the staff, General Gabba, told me that he had spent many years in the colony as a young man and that his ambition had been to be given command of the



native troops—"instead of which," he added with a rueful laugh, "you see what I am." It was very like the junior subaltern of three days previously, lamenting that he was not with his regiment. Staff jobs do not seem to have been coveted in the Army of Africa.

At 8.5 a.m. we heard a couple of dull booms— aeroplanes dropping bombs, said the expert. Again silence, then the roar of aeroplane engines as a squadron flew over on its return from Abyssinia. Still there was no news. It was nearly half past nine before a staff officer appeared with a paper in his hand ; it was the first message from the front. The chief of staff read it aloud to the Commander-in-Chief and the group of officers. Even from the few words that carried across the platform to the corner where we had withdrawn one could tell that the news was good. General de Bono sat down at the table and studied the map. Presently he strolled over and settled himself on the wall for a friendly chat.

Another and a longer *communiqué* arrived ; there was a consultation, and when that was over two or three of us frankly abandoned our tactful attitude and clamoured for news. We flung ourselves on the map and a friendly general explained the situation. "The troops have met with no resistance anywhere, the country appears to be entirely empty. The three columns are advancing very rapidly ; the centre, which is composed of native troops, has arrived here and here," and he traced a line on the map. It was a strange experience to follow the course of events with the Commander-in-Chief and his staff, but as this book does not aspire to be a military history of the Abyssinian campaign, I will not give a list of the unknown little villages which had been occupied.

About ten o'clock the Commander-in-Chief and his

staff said good-bye and left, and the party belonging to the Press Bureau was collected and taken back to the empty hutments where we had paused during the night. We discovered that these stood just below a field hospital, where, after luncheon in our mess, we were most kindly offered beds for a sleep, as ours had not yet arrived.

The rest of the afternoon passed in writing and in telephoning to headquarters for news, of which there was none except that everything was going well. By dinner-time one or two officers who had been in the advance dropped in to dinner; they confirmed all that had been said officially. The country was very like what we saw on this side of the frontier. There had been plenty of water, but men and cars had got across the Mareb without the slightest difficulty; the native troops, in the centre, were marching very fast (the native troops pride themselves on the pace that they can cover the ground, but I was quite convinced that our Black Shirt friends of the First Group were going to show that they were just as good at the game); the very few villages were full of women and children, who seemed more interested and impressed than alarmed.

One of our friends had wished to take a photograph of a native chief who had not left with the other fighting men; he had seemed a little suspicious of the intentions of the Italian officer at first, but when he was offered some money he stooped down and kissed the Italian's feet! The joke of the day had been a fortified post with a white flag, which had been surrounded with the idea of taking its occupants prisoner, and was found to be completely empty.

The evening *communiqué* reported that the left and centre had got on very fast, but our friend General

Maravigna on the right was meeting with difficult country, and though doing very well, was not going quite so quickly; his objective was Adowa, and here the plain was narrower, so the military problem was graver. The advance of the right and centre was going to be slightly slowed down to synchronize the movement.

From the point of view of the party one of the great events of the evening was the arrival of our beds. How the Press Bureau in Asmara had managed at that time to find, and then to commandeer, a motor-lorry was a secret known only to itself.

Coatit, where we now found ourselves, was close to the frontier as the falcon flies, but at a dead end so far as roads were concerned, so I decided to return to Asmara in the hope of finding a car that would take me at least as far as the ford beyond Adi Qualà, where General Maravigna's Army Corps had crossed the Mareb.

It is strange how one's sense of values entirely alters. Asmara, which had seemed to me little more than a village on my first arrival, now appeared to be a large town; but it also seemed to be a dead town, very far from the march of events and armies; so on the next afternoon, when Lieut. Cazzaroli offered to take me as far into Abyssinia as a car would go, I joyfully accepted his offer.

We followed the main road as far as Adi Qualà, where I had been just a week previously, and there took counsel with Capitano Cannone, who had been so kind to the party on that occasion. He said as far as he knew General Maravigna's headquarters were still on the Mareb and that we could proceed. A lieutenant of his was in camp on the banks with some stores, and he could probably give us some kind of accommodation for the night.

Beyond Adi Qualà the road had been cut to pieces by the passage of troops and transport. I had never imagined that a small car could face such conditions. On the steep stretch down into the first deep valley there were the usual hairpin bends and the ruts were nearly a foot deep; these were crossed by ridges and holes varying from a foot to two feet. It was dark by this time, which fact, if it hid some of the dangers from our eyes, naturally increased our difficulties. How the little car stood the strain of what it was asked to do, and how Lieut. Cazzaroli kept it on the road, I could not imagine. He had driven in the great thousand-mile motor race in Italy, and he said that it was child's play compared to what he was now doing. Up and down we bumped and twisted for nearly twenty miles, with a welcome pause when we were stopped by a sentry on a hill-top with a telephone; the next stretch of the road was for "one-way traffic", and there was a car coming up.

We got out to stretch our legs and peered down into the valley below. The trees were larger and more numerous and the whole countryside looked greener and more fertile; down on the plain of the Mareb itself the road became almost a lane as our head-lights lit up the foliage on either side.

There was a lighted mess-tent under some trees, and Lieut. Cazzaroli drew up to investigate. It was the *Ufficio Servizi* of the Gavinana Division, and Lieut. Cazzaroli found a friend; indeed, we both found a most kind friend, for the Colonel in command asked us to dinner. Though it was nearly nine o'clock it was still quite warm, and we sat round the table with the side of the tent wide open; for tablecloth we had newspapers, and we ate off tin plates. The provisions which we had brought from Asmara

were hailed as a welcome change from rations. The Colonel and another of the officers came from Florence ; indeed, it seemed to me that the whole of Eritrea was peopled with Florentines—a squad of them who were working on the road had mended the car for us that afternoon—and the fact that I had lived for a year in that city gave me a kind of brevet rank.

It was a very cheerful company which sat in the glare of the petrol lamp. The news had come through that Adowa had been surrounded and that the troops were only waiting for dawn to enter the town. The unhappy memory of forty years had been wiped out, but there was no boasting or bragging, only a deep content which showed itself in jokes and laughter. One amusing story was that of a French journalist who, having been to Addis Ababa, had had an interview with the Negus and had inspected the Imperial bodyguard. Arrived in Eritrea, he had solemnly warned the mess that the capture of Adowa was an undertaking which would take many weeks and cost many lives. "I wonder," mused one officer, "what that journalist is saying tonight."

Outside in the darkness the soldiers were singing the traditional songs of the Tuscan countryside to the accompaniment of a mandoline. The modern note was supplied by the field telephone, which rang incessantly, or else the orderly shouted wildly down it trying to put through calls. The wireless bulletins arrived promptly, neatly written out, but Europe seemed a very long way off, and the Colonel, having given orders to strike camp at 5.30 a.m., suggested that we should drive down and see the Mareb by moonlight.

It was an almost ridiculously romantic scene. The river at this point winds between high wooded banks and at that moment was about 200 feet wide, having wide stretches of

stone and sand on either side. The actual stream was spanned by a substantial wooden bridge which had been thrown across in a couple of hours by the Engineers on the morning of October 3rd. Another colonel (and, needless to add, another Florentine), who had come up to visit the mess after dinner and had returned with us, had his mess-tent on the shore and was surrounded by his stores. I asked if the river ever filled its wide bed.

"Indeed it does in the rains—even one afternoon's thunderstorm—and I and my stores would be washed away."

We had to go and drink a glass of wine with him, and then we strolled over the bridge into Abyssinia, the only sign of life being a handful of soldiers who had made themselves a large bonfire of wood.

As we walked up the new road under the trees the Italian officers were lost in surprise that no effort had been made to oppose the crossing of the river. "What a magnificent position; think of a few machine-guns in this wood, or even men with rifles; they could have held us up for some hours. And we know that there were small detachments of troops along this bank a few days ago." "Whereas," chimed in another officer, "our men were organizing bathing parties while they were waiting to advance."

It was now long after midnight and even Italians thought that it was time to go to bed, so Lieut. Cazzaroli and I started out to look for our unknown lieutenant of the Army Service Corps who was encamped "somewhere near the bridge". Very naturally we failed to find him and decided to spend the night in the car, when we once again fell in with the "O.C. Stores". He refused to allow me to sleep in the car, dug out his batman, turned out of his tent and established me in it.

I must say that many parts of Eritrea seem to combine the worst of all climates. The night was bitterly cold, and so damp that in the morning the roof of the tent looked as if it were covered with hoar-frost, whereas by day the valley is like an oven.

Comforted with coffee at 6 a.m. while we clasped the tin cups tightly in an endeavour to warm our hands, we started off again to cross the frontier, this time by car. In one day a road, possible for lorries and artillery, had been made by the troops for a distance of nearly ten miles, and gangs of workmen were already improving and widening the stretch just beyond the river. We bumped along, sometimes fording streams, and eventually arrived at an open grassy space surrounded by quite large trees. Here we found our friends of the *Ufficio Servizi* and nobody else; the troops were, of course, miles away near Adowa; the General and H.Q. had disappeared into the mountains in pursuit, and the Colonel and his staff were waiting the arrival of mules from "somewhere" to enable them to follow.

There was nothing to be done but wish them good luck and turn our faces home again, and then our troubles began; we had passed troops on foot, or with field-guns on mules, on our way up, but now we became involved in all the heavy traffic behind the lines. Convoys of motor-lorries which had left Adi Qualà at dawn were rushing up with supplies, while others were abandoning their bivouacs and hurrying back to load up. We crawled along in the middle of a convoy in dust so thick that it was impossible to see beyond the end of our bonnet; the only thing to be done was to imitate the lorry-drivers and wrap up one's nose and mouth in a thick woollen scarf. Finally we stuck in the narrowest part of the road, and I must confess that I thought we were there at least for the rest of the day. Two convoys

of motor-lorries had met and had become inextricably entangled with a battery of mechanized heavy artillery. There we sat for an hour, and though it was only 9 a.m. the sun was now so hot that the metal of the car scorched my arm through a woollen jumper and a tweed coat.

The captain in charge of one of the motor convoys took command of the situation, and by means of making the lorries back an inch here and advance an inch there and finally scrape off each other's remaining paint, he eventually disentangled everybody. At one critical moment he ascended a convenient boulder and addressed a driver who did not jump to the word of command in what I imagined was a very fine choice of language. When he had quite finished, one of the soldiers, who had been listening with obvious admiration, turned to another and said in a tone of mild surprise : "He wants that man to go on."

Meanwhile, I came to the conclusion that I had either gone mad or got sunstroke, as I heard a cuckoo in the wood ; however, the notes went on with the monotonous energy of that bird, so I was finally forced to believe my ears.

We found a disabled tank by the roadside, and as Lieut. Cazzaroli had never seen one he had to stop and inspect it. The crew were of course full of news ; the tanks had done magnificently, but there was a slight air of grievance as they were to have had the honour of leading the advance, but nothing and nobody could stop the native troops from rushing ahead. The men declared that the mere sight of the tanks had terrified the Abyssinians, at which, indeed, I was not surprised.

The whole of the drive back to Adi Qualà over the mountains consisted of meeting or trying to pass motor-lorries, while the road and the rocks gave back the blinding



heat. At the traffic control—there ought to have been one every mile!—we were held up, and took the opportunity of visiting a native battery encamped by the roadside, in order to beg for some petrol and a minor repair to the car. With the boundless hospitality of Italian officers I was immediately asked what I would have. Would I have some brandy, which was evidently the pride of the mess? But I thought that brandy was hardly a suitable drink at 10 a.m. under a tropical sun, and asked for mineral water. Could they not give me something to eat? And when I declined, they insisted on pressing a tin of peaches into my hand, for who knew when I should get any food? I always hated taking anything from men going up to the front, but they always seemed determined to show that they had something to spare.

## CHAPTER V

### AN INTERLUDE AT ADI QUALÀ

IN any free moments that we had from attending to the perils of the road, Lieut. Cazzaroli and I discussed what I had better do next. Naturally I wanted to get to Adowa as soon as possible. Was it worth while going the whole way back to Asmara, or should I try and stay at Adi Qualà in the hope of being sent up by lorry as soon as a chance occurred? We decided that the question should be referred to the Captain of the Army Service Corps, who would be in the best position to advise me. Lieut. Cazzaroli had in any case to go back to Asmara with the car.

We arrived at Adi Qualà at 12.30, only to find that our kind friend Capitano Cannone was away on duty and that the command had devolved on a subaltern of twenty-three, who, though most anxious to help, naturally could not decide what I had better do. The affair was more or less settled by the appearance of a French journalist clamouring for my place in the car. I was well enough pleased to await events at Adi Qualà instead of at Asmara, sixty miles away, but I had considerable qualms as to what Capitano Cannone would feel when he found me dumped at his headquarters in this unceremonious way.

I lunched with the officers in the mess, and just as we had finished I heard the sound of a band and singing which had a familiar ring. It was the Black Shirt Legion with whom I had been in the *Biancamano* marching up to the front. There was much waving and many greetings from officers

and men when they saw me standing by the roadside. Like everyone else, they were in the highest spirits, trudging along in the dust with that slouching gait, which looks so slow and lazy, but eats up the miles so tirelessly. My particular friends stopped to shake hands and exchange the news, which chiefly seemed to be that they were very well and were on their way to Adowa.

Capitano Cannone returned at about 5 p.m. after a twelve hours' day, having motored as far as possible and then ridden up into the mountains. Any man would have been justifiably annoyed at finding a practically strange woman sitting in his room, but, whatever his feelings, Capitano Cannone gave me a friendly welcome. I asked if I could not go down to Asmara as I felt that I was inevitably being a nuisance, but he refused to allow me to do such a thing ; it would be a horrible drive in a lorry. I should have his room for the night and he would sleep in his office. He would listen to no protests or remonstrances, and I felt that it would give less trouble not to argue but to do what I was told.

I thought that I would at least get out of his way for the time being, so started to go for a walk. It was the hour when all the men had come off work and the road was crowded. I had forgotten how surprising a sight a European woman would be at Adi Qualà. Many of them were obviously longing for a talk, but politely waited for me to give them an opening. In a moment a group had collected. They had not heard any of the news from the front, and I found myself giving an embarrassed and impromptu lecture in halting Italian on the military situation as far as I knew it. They took the most burning and professional interest in the road beyond the Mareb and bombarded me with questions, the most important being : When

were *they* going to be sent down to help? "The Army must have a road," they decided gleefully; "they will need us."

When I returned to Capitano Cannone's quarters I obtained an insight into the amount of work and responsibility which his position involved. He was trying to write a report; the telephone never ceased—apparently the whole Army Corps was ringing up wanting this and that and the other thing—the field line was very bad and the orderly shouted at the top of his very loud voice. Everyone from colonels to workmen were coming to lay problems before Capitano Cannone and get advice or orders; how he kept his head and his temper I could not imagine.

Finally at 9 p.m. the office was left in charge of the orderly and we went to dinner. The command mess was most interesting, for in addition to all his other work Capitano Cannone had to entertain everyone who passed through Adi Qualà, from wandering generals to a waif and stray like myself. That evening two airmen had very literally dropped in, for they had been overtaken by darkness and had been forced to land on a piece of level ground near by. They were modest about the achievements of the Air Force, though their squadron had had a special commendation from a Divisional General, and were chiefly concerned with giving descriptions of the beauty and richness of the country which they had seen between Adowa and Axum.

The mess as a whole reported that they had heard that the civil population in the Tigrai had shown neither fear nor hatred for the Italian troops, and that the peasants had readily come to sell provisions. "But then," as one officer explained, "you must remember they know us quite well; they were always coming over here either singly or with caravans, and many of them are friends of ours; they hate

the Amharic people." Menelik, it must be remembered, had conquered the province, deposed the local chiefs and put in his own men.

The next morning I was taken by the doctor in charge to see the local field hospital where a dozen Ascari had arrived. They had all clean bullet-wounds, and these were taken very lightly both by the men and the doctor. "They will all be well again in a few days," he said ; "the difference between these wounds and what I saw in the Great War ! The only difficulty that I have had with the men was about the beds ; of course none of them had ever been in one before and they were a little frightened at first."

I talked to one non-commissioned officer, who declared that his wound was nothing, that he did not suffer at all. "I want to go back to the front ; I want to go to Addis Ababa," he said, with a fierceness in his voice and eyes which was startling in its intensity. The wounded men happened to be from the neighbourhood of Adi Qualà, and outside the tents their wives sat in white chattering circles waiting for the hour when they would be admitted to see their husbands. While I was visiting the tents a man was brought in very badly injured, as he had gone to fetch some water and had been fallen upon and beaten by some Abyssinians ; his chief emotion seemed to be satisfaction that his comrades had come up in time to account for all his assailants.

Close by was a field operating theatre with all its appurtenances and an X-ray installation. They appeared to contain every gadget that the heart of surgeon could desire, even to an emergency electrical plant in case the dynamo failed.

"We are absolutely mobile and self-contained," explained the surgeon. "Everything fits into our two motor-lorries—we only arrived twenty-four hours ago and, as you see,

everything is practically in order ; they are just connecting up the electric light."

A little farther on stood two great wooden buildings, while a third of stone was just being completed ; it was to be a base hospital with a thousand beds. Certainly the Italians were leaving nothing to chance.

"Kabul town is sun and dust," sang Mr. Kipling years ago, and the words were a good description of Adi Qualà. All day long the sun poured down and the dust rose in clouds as the traffic rattled up and down the road and the troops tramped by. Capitano Cannone, by a magic known only to himself, had found accommodation for me when everyone else declared that there was none, and the knowledge that I was out of his way made me happy. The control post for the traffic was beside my room, and here every vehicle going up to the front, and most of those coming down, had to halt for orders. The engines of motor-lorries roared like thunder, motor-bicycles gave imitations of machine-guns, orders were shouted above the din, and from 5 a.m. to midnight the stream of traffic never ceased. It was not the place for anyone desiring a rest cure, but I thought with pity of the journalists at Asmara and marvelled at my good fortune.

That evening as dusk fell, an artillery regiment (in the Italian Army batteries are organized in regiments) of what looked to my ignorant eyes to be heavy guns lumbered past. Each gun was drawn by an enormous lorry filled with men ; the wheels of the lorries had iron spikes sticking out like the wheels of the chariots of Boadicea in the pictures in *Little Arthur's History of England*. Batteries and motor convoys seemed to suffer from a mutual attraction, for these also became involved with a convoy of lorries, and a fine block occurred ; every driver was asked why he had

stopped at that precise spot, when there was obviously nowhere else for him to stop.

One of the officers of the regiment came to dinner and explained to me that they were known as "light artillery", which he agreed was something of a misnomer. He was quite hurt when I asked if it would not be difficult to get the guns down the narrow mountain road, round corners which had seemed almost too sharp for a little car.

"You don't know what we can do ; we have just been to the manœuvres and we climbed a slope of one in forty."

His only worry was his petrol supply, for the great heat and the rarefication of the atmosphere in Eritrea cause every motor engine to "eat" petrol, and his giants needed enormous quantities.

A visit to the head of the civil administration of the district gave me a different view of the possibilities of the development of the colony. I told him what I had heard from the soldiers and workmen about the richness of the soil.

"Those men arrived just after the great rains and have seen the ground at the moment of its greatest fertility. From now until the little rains in the spring, it will become steadily drier ; the water drains away very quickly and the rivers virtually disappear ; even the famous Mareb will be but a trickle. The result is that cultivation can only be carried on to any extent during a very brief period, and the methods adopted by the natives are really the best suited to the soil.

"I do not think that there is any opening for Italian emigrants here. The native population is increasing rapidly as the result of what we have done to improve the health of the people and to protect them from raids, and we cannot displace them to settle Italians on the land. Even as it is,

we have to import corn from Australia to supplement our supply. The lowlands are so hot and arid that no one can live there. Cattle are raised on the mountain slopes, but, as you have seen, the pasture is poor and the animals very small; we have done a great deal in stamping out disease and improving the breed, and now there is a factory for tinned beef at Asmara. It is only on the central plateau that agriculture is possible, and then only at certain seasons. On a small section on the eastern frontier we have been able to grow cotton and tobacco, but do not see any possibility of further developments of that kind.

"The country has been thoroughly surveyed for minerals, but none have been found in a quantity which makes it worth while to work them. It is a poor territory, and it would really only have been of value if the Abyssinians had been prepared to carry out the various treaties which they signed with us and allowed us to collaborate in the agricultural and industrial development of that country. Then Eritrea would have been the natural outlet for the commerce of the interior.

"There is very fine unoccupied land in the Tigrai quite suitable for the settlement of Italian peasants, while the province of Harrar in the south could be made a great industrial centre."

I asked how the Italians had put an end to slavery in Eritrea.

"That was made easy by the way in which we acquired the colony. At the time when we occupied Massawa, this country was held by a collection of small tribes too weak to resist the attacks and raids of their more powerful neighbours. The news very quickly spread that Italian rule brought peace and justice, and chief after chief came to ask for our protection. We made the abolition of slavery



a condition of that protection, and with the increased security and prosperity the practice very quickly died out. There are, of course, no slaves in the country today. When any escape from across the frontier we give them a certificate freeing them; naturally it holds good only so long as they remain here; if they return, the first thing that their owners do is to tear up the certificate, and the second thing is to give them a good beating."

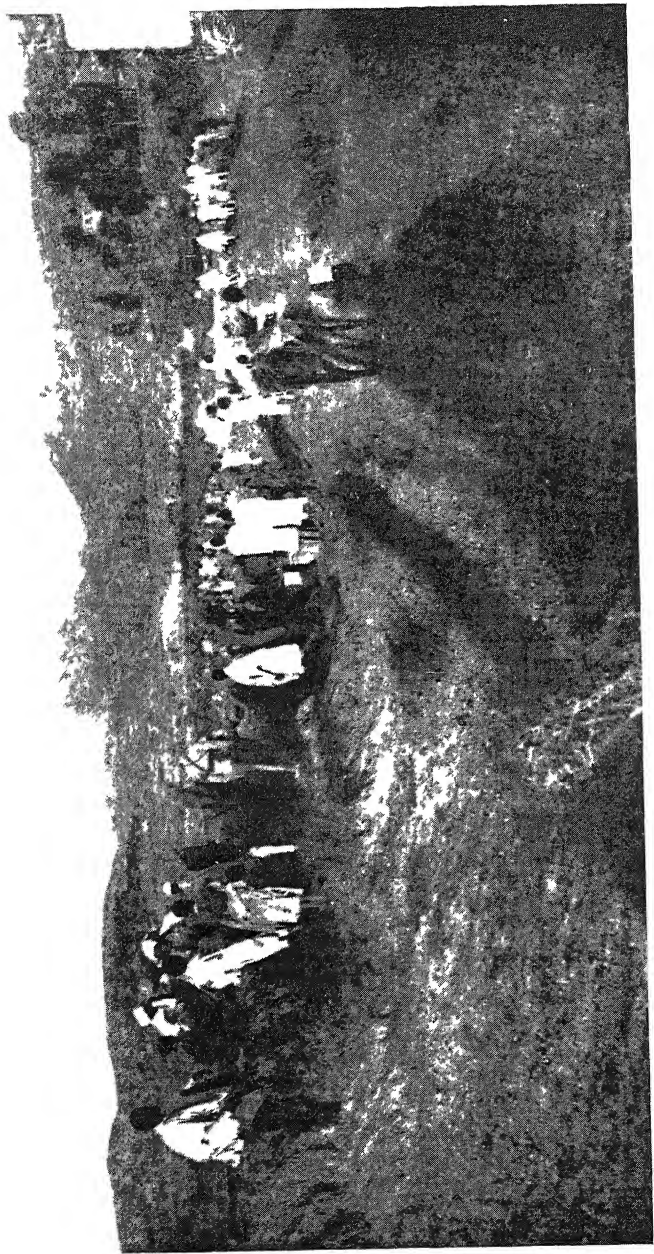
"I am told that the natives here are of a low order of intelligence," I said.

"That is quite true; we must recognize that they are one of the most backward races in Africa. We are doing our best to educate them, but we are going slowly and are being careful not just to give them a sufficient veneer to turn them into bad Europeans. The sons of those who were boys at the time of the occupation are doing well. My whole staff here—clerks, accountant, etcetera—are natives, they speak and write excellent Italian and are very efficient. They give themselves tremendous airs amongst their own people, but at intervals they come and ask for leave immediately. I see the wild look in their eyes and I know that they are going to revert to the old ways of their race. In a few days they will be back again and settle down quietly to work.

"As a whole, their loyalty in good times and in bad has been beyond praise, and the devotion of the Ascarì to their Italian officers is lifelong. Many of the officers who served in the native regiments as subalterns and captains are back here now as colonels and generals, but their men have not forgotten them and tell long stories of their careers. I was standing beside a veteran of Adowa the other day watching some troops on the march, and the old man recognized the Colonel. 'There is my Captain!' he cried, and rushed



GENERAL VILLA SANTA, COMMANDING THE GAVINANA DIVISION, BESIDE  
THE MONUMENT ERECTED BY THE DIVISION IN MEMORY OF THE MEN WHO  
FELL IN THE BATTLE OF ADOA, 1896



ON THE ROAD TO ANU CHIEFS ON THE WAY TO MAKE THEIR ACTS OF SUBMISSION

forward to kiss first the hands and then the feet of the Colonel. Volunteers have poured in for this war ; we have been able to take only a certain number, but we can have as many more as we like."

Dinner that night was a meal eaten in snatches by the five officers who were responsible for supplying the needs of an Army Corps sixty miles away over the mountains, the last twenty-five miles being only possible for mule transport. Every detail, from a query as to when so many thousand rations would reach a certain division down to the whereabouts of a missing motor-lorry, had to be dealt with on the spot. Shy subalterns and dust-covered motor-cyclists would stand saluting, just visible in the light of the open door, would be called in to deliver their message, and one or other of the officers would go off to deal with the situation. The tiny commando was working a steady nineteen hours out of the twenty-four, but all their sympathy was for the lorry-drivers, who, they declared, were never off the road. "Those are the men who are doing the real work," they said.

It became obvious that the road to Adowa was taking longer than had been expected, and a return to Asmara to deal with letters and business became important. The Press Bureau thought that it ought to reclaim one of its wandering sheep, and telephoned to say that it was sending a car for me. I was also beginning to hunger for news ; I had never realized the isolation of what was effectively, if not literally, the zone just behind the front. We knew what was happening at Adowa and on the way up and down, because that was the business of the "command". But of the other two Army Corps and of international affairs we heard nothing, and everyone was too busy to inquire. Talk at

mess dealt with the immediate needs of the moment, and there were also the stories which must be common to the armies of all countries. The doctor in charge of the field hospital indented for three tables and a specified amount of wood of which he was in urgent need. He received thirty tables but no wood. When he remonstrated and said that he had no room for thirty tables, and where was the wood, he was cheerfully asked if he could not saw up the tables. "And this," he commented, "in a country where everyone is clamouring for tables ; I know a large hospital without one !"

Capitano Cannone said that three days after he had arrived at Massawa he had been made president of a commission to buy camels and organize camel caravans, when he did not know a camel's nose from its tail. Another officer said that he had been put in charge of a large train of pack donkeys, all of which insisted on having foals on the march. "One certainly learns odd things in war," he commented philosophically.

The longer time that I spent in the mess, the more I became convinced that the officers in the fighting services in all countries must on the whole conform to type. Despite the differences of temperament and character between the English and the Italians, the officers at Adi Qualà seemed to me to be remarkably like my own relations and friends in the British Army. There was a colonel interested in little save military questions ; there were hard-working junior officers amusingly diversified by a war volunteer fresh from the University, with all the undergraduate's love for discussing abstract questions and a boyish excitement at finding himself where he was. Among these conventional types there was one man who stood out. He might have been a writer or an artist ; intellectual and highly strung, with the

quick Italian wit, he was probably the best soldier of them all, a racehorse among good useful hacks. Unconsciously he dominated the mess, and it was to him that the casual guests instinctively addressed their conversation. Two of these were certainly not familiar types.

One was a colonel on his way to the front. He had been an *Ardito* during the World War—i.e. a member of one of the Italian bodies of shock troops, who were all volunteers and were chosen for their reckless courage. His talk was all of wars and camps. He loved fighting for its own sake, and knew nothing of any other life except that of a soldier. For all his modern accoutrements, I felt that he was a man of another period, that he ought to have been a captain of mercenaries under some great *condottiere* of the Renaissance. Shakespeare would have studied him lovingly and added another picture to his great gallery of portraits of soldiers.

This colonel was followed next day by an officer in an Ascari regiment who, much to his disgust, had been recalled from Adowa to some job in Asmara. He was a far rougher type than any I had previously seen. He told me that he had seen years of service in the Italian colonies with native troops and had been for fourteen months in Eritrea. His whole life was bound up in his regiment and his whole talk was of his men, their characters and the way they should be handled. It was a story which had become familiar to me, because every Italian officer with the Ascari regiments spoke in the same way. He was talking of the pace of their advance, and I asked how it compared with the famous trot of the Bersaglieri.

“The Bersaglieri !” he cried in scorn. “You don’t compare the Ascari pace with that of men, you compare it with that of mules ; we Italian officers are mounted, and it takes

us all our time to keep up with them. They have the qualities and defects of children, they need affection and a firm hand ; they are as proud as Lucifer and they never forget an injury or an insult, they will wait for years to repay it. They live for war alone. Last winter I was ordered up to this very place with my company because we thought there was going to be trouble on the frontier. My cook happened to be on leave, but somehow he heard what had happened and the next day he arrived more dead than alive, having run I don't know how many miles. I asked him why he had come back before his leave was up. 'What,' he said, 'there may be fighting and I not there ? I should be shamed for ever.' We don't want all these Italian troops here," concluded the officer. "Give me 100,000 Ascari and a free hand and I will conquer Abyssinia tomorrow."

## CHAPTER VI

### PROCLAIMING A CHIEF

My return to Asmara plunged me into an entirely different life. I found a telegram awaiting me asking me to act temporarily as special correspondent to a famous London paper, a type of work of which I was totally ignorant ; but you cannot stop to argue in a cable, particularly when you are in a war zone and communication is slow and difficult. So I wired my acceptance and felt inclined to add condolences to the editor. Some thirty journalists, mostly Italian, had now arrived in Asmara, and for the first time in my life I found myself living and working among pressmen.

The news of the outer world during my absence which had come by wireless included two remarkable fairy tales from Addis Ababa ; first that Adigrat had been retaken, and secondly that the Abyssinians had counter-attacked at Adowa, surprised the Italian camp and killed a large number of men. All this was, of course, entirely untrue ; there were no Abyssinian forces near either of these towns and no attacks had been made.

What was of great interest and immediate importance was the fact that Ras Hailé Selassié Gugsä had arrived at general headquarters to make his submission to the Italians. This most important chief was the son of an old ally of Italy and the ruler of a large section of the province of Tigräi. He had approached the Italian lines accompanied by 1500 of his followers, and spoke for the loyalty of 12,000 more. He had no reason to love the Emperor, for



Ras Gugsa is the head of the old royal dynasty of the Tigrai, which claims to be in direct descent from Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, and consequently the rightful rulers of the whole of Ethiopia. In order to try and buy his loyalty the Emperor had given his own daughter to Ras Gugsa, and, unlike many such marriages of convenience, husband and wife had adored each other. When she was taken dangerously ill, the superstition of the Coptic priests prevented Ras Gugsa from calling in an Italian doctor who happened to be at Makale, where the Ras lived. An appeal to the Emperor from the unfortunate girl resulted in his sending his own doctor from Addis Ababa by aeroplane, but it was too late to save her life. This princess had had a European education, and though he had never been in Europe her husband had shared her love for civilization, which made him the more anxious to detach himself from the barbarous ways of Ethiopia. We heard the details of the events which had preceded his action from a most unexpected witness.

On the following day a Swiss engineer appeared at Asmara who had come to Italian headquarters with the Ras Gugsa. This M. Bietry de l'Erghel had been for four years in Abyssinia building roads; the last two years had been spent in the Tigrai, where he was when war broke out. He had asked permission to leave the country, which was refused him by the Emperor. In some way he heard that Ras Gugsa intended to make his submission to the Italians, and, abandoning all his baggage, he set out to walk the fifty miles which separated him from Makale. He arrived there to find that the Ras had called a meeting of all his subordinate chiefs, to whom he had announced his intention. There was no opposition, and the next day the Ras set out.

Meanwhile, the 250 men of the Imperial troops

who were at Makale fled hastily, as they were hated by the local population. There had indeed been considerable trouble between them and the local population on the outbreak of war, for the Tigrini had no desire to fight the Italians, having suffered much from the depredations of the Imperial troops.

M. Bietry said that all the roads which he had constructed had been made by forced labour of the peasants, and that in his experience the popularity of the Negus was rapidly on the wane. Peasants and merchants alike were longing for a system of civilized government which would assure them justice and freedom.

Our next visitor was a young Italian post-office official who had also arrived with Ras Gugsa. This man had been for some time at Makale, where he had been in charge of the telegraph office on the line from Asmara to Addis Ababa. He said that he had liked the natives, and put down their barbarous habits to ignorance. We asked him if he had been in any danger on the outbreak of war, and he replied that for a short time the position had been a little precarious; the telegraph line had immediately been put out of order, which had warned him that something was wrong, but there was also a telephone line worked by Abyssinians. These men were friends of his and told him that the Imperial troops had orders to take him prisoner. The local inhabitants, led by Ras Gugsa, rallied to his protection; they begged him to hoist an Italian flag over the telegraph office in order to show to the Italian aeroplanes that he was safe, and then brought all their women and children and encamped them round the flag for protection.

When Gugsa was starting for the Italian lines he took this young man with him, and the telegraphist found himself acting as envoy for the Ras. He had obviously the greatest

admiration for Gugsä, and announced firmly : "There you have the next Emperor of Abyssinia, and he is the rightful heir to the throne which Menelik usurped."

On the next day we heard the news that the Ras Seyum, the Governor of Axum, had fled with a thousand armed followers, and that the Coptic clergy of the town and district had come to Adowa to make their submission to General Maravigna. They were followed by representatives of the Mussulman community and six of the lesser chiefs. Thus district after district of the rich province of the Tigräi was falling into the hands of the Italians without a blow being struck. If ever the title of a ramshackle empire was appropriate, it should apparently have been applied to that of Abyssinia.

My stay in Asmara gave me an opportunity of a talk with the Vice-Governor of Eritrea on possible developments in the colony. He told me that he thought the most immediate sources of prosperity would lie in the mineral wealth of the country which existed in the south. Gold was being worked there which gave twenty to twenty-five grs. to the ton, whereas some of the mines in the Transvaal which were worked at a profit yielded only three grs. The country is full of iron—indeed, it sticks out of the hill-sides—but the difficulty is the total lack of coal to work it, and, of course, it would not pay to export it in bulk to Italy. The hope is in the development of local industries, but here again the problem of fuel will arise, for despite the most careful survey no trace of oil has been found.

I returned to the perennial subject of the possibility of the immigration of Italian peasants, but the Vice-Governor took very much the same view as the Resident at Adi Qualä. "The natives," he said, "are passionately attached to their land, they are most loyal subjects, and the last thing

that we should think of doing is to expropriate them. The system of land holding in this country is the most complicated thing you can imagine and varies from district to district ; sometimes it is held by tribes, sometimes by families, sometimes by individuals. Undoubtedly the country is capable of great agricultural development when we can teach the natives to use modern methods and machinery. With the increase of wealth which this will bring, I think there will be many openings for Italian industrial workers and artisans. It may be possible to settle a few farmers on the slopes of the mountains where the land is quite good. At present it is used for nothing but pasture, and the shepherds have not that attachment to the soil which the agriculturists feel.

“Cattle-raising is one of the flourishing and growing industries ; we have stamped out the diseases which used to decimate the herds, and we have here in Asmara a small but most up-to-date laboratory for the production of sera, which we distribute free. One of the important tasks of the laboratory is the preparation of serum against rabies, from which we suffer a great deal, for it is so prevalent amongst the wild animals.”

I did not like to keep so busy a man, so asked one last question about the attitude of the natives towards education. “They are mad about it,” was the reply ; “the schools are crammed, and their one idea is to imitate the Italians in everything.”

One piece of advice that I was given was to try to see the northern part of the colony, which is richly wooded country, quite unlike that which I had seen up to the present.

As the rightful holder of the post of special correspondent was expected to arrive in the course of the morning of the next day, I was no longer tied to the end of a telegraph

wire, and was once again free to leave Asmara and to take the road to Coatit. Even a week's absence had made a difference, both in the countryside and in the road itself. Dark-green trees carried bunches of great white blossoms, others were a shower of yellow, there were burning bushes of a deep pink, and the natives were reaping the patches of ripe corn. Everywhere men were at work on the road, widening dangerous corners and improving the surface.

Coatit stands on a high irregular plateau, and below the row of hutments for the journalists was a modest collection of wooden huts and some tents, in which were lodged at the moment the headquarters of General de Bono. There was no guard, not even a flag to be seen, only two Carabinieri who walked up and down and suggested that cars should go less than their usual fifty miles an hour in order not to stir up the ankle-deep dust. Beyond, on a small rise, were the deserted beehive huts of a native regiment, and across a little dip a tiny village climbed a steep slope. The hovels, with their brown stone walls and flat roofs with brown grass growing on top, must be the most perfectly camouflaged buildings in the world. Even when one is quite close it is easy to miss seeing them, so perfectly do they blend with the arid countryside. On other parts of the little plateau huts and tents were scattered about, but except for an occasional car or motor-cyclist, or soldiers doing a little carpentering or building, there was no sign of life or activity. A modern commander-in-chief conducts his war by telephone or wireless.

In that brief space of time when the sun has lost its fierceness, and before darkness falls, I climbed up to the empty Ascari barracks and looked away to the great ring of the Abyssinian mountains with their wild peaks and long flat summits. In the evening light they take for a few

moments something of the blue and purple shadows of the Apennines, while here and there the face of a cliff shines a brilliant pink. Below me in the little gorge native women were filling the inevitable petrol tins with water and small parties of cows were proceeding on their independent way up the hillside to their homes ; falcons sailed to and fro beneath me, and even a swallow flashed by. Asmara and the typewriters of the journalists seemed very far away.

But its problems pursued me even to Coatit. It should be explained that at this period the positions of the three Italian Army Corps resembled the prongs of a trident ; General Santini with the 1st Army Corps represented the left prong with its point at Adigrat ; the Native Corps was the centre prong with its headquarters at Entischiò ; while General Maravigna and the 2nd Corps at Adowa was the right-hand prong. These three points were separated by many miles of mountainous country, across which there were nothing but mule-tracks, but each corps now had its road stretching back into Eritrea. Coatit was situated on the middle of the cross-piece of the trident, with Asmara at the end of the handle.

If communications were difficult between the Army Corps, they were infinitely more so for the Press Bureau and the journalists. At Coatit they were in direct touch with headquarters, but then the problem arose of getting either their message or themselves away. The handful of light cars which had been sufficient for the needs of half a dozen pressmen were quite inadequate for fifty, all clamouring to go in different directions ; also the cars themselves were beginning to give out, for they had not been built to carry heavy loads over the rough mountain roads ; but there were no more to be had in Eritrea in war-time.

Having arrived at Coatit, it looked as if I should be there

indefinitely ; however, one of the lessons that I had learnt was not to worry about the future, the unexpected arrived with almost monotonous regularity.

At luncheon-time came the news of the entry of the Italian troops into Axum, the sacred city of Abyssinia, whither they had gone at the invitation of the inhabitants.

That evening we were told that another car was *hors de combat*, and with it seemed to disappear my last chance of getting to either Adowa or Adigrat, the immediate objects of my desires. Signor Casertano, the head of the Press Bureau, offered me the alternative of staying at Coatit or of returning with him to Asmara the next morning. At 10 p.m., while we were gossiping round the mess-table, the telephone bell rang, and in the course of the subsequent conversation I suddenly heard my name mentioned with a query as to whether I might come too. It was very hard to wait for the end of the call to know where it was and if I was to be allowed to go. I sat with my mouth open, gasping with anxiety, until I could be told that General de Bono and headquarters staff were going to Adigrat the next morning ; Signor Casertano was to accompany them, and he had obtained permission for me to go too. Could I be ready at 6.30 a.m. ? It was an unnecessary question.

On the few occasions in which I have lived in an atmosphere of reflected glory I have always found that it has its drawbacks, and this was true of our position of honour with headquarters staff. General de Bono set what I considered was a very suitable pace for driving over the precipitous cross-road from Coatit to Adi Caieh, on the main line of communications from Asmara to Adigrat. But our small, fast car did not share my opinion ; so long as she was

allowed to rush her fences she was prepared to face anything in or out of reason, but asked to jog along quietly and she began to jib badly. The first occasion—at a hairpin bend with a nasty drop beside it—she began to run backwards, and we were very literally taken in hand by some kind lorry-drivers and hoisted up to the top. On the second occasion we had two staff cars as companions in misfortune, and then it was a case for everyone to get out and push each car in turn. But it was obvious that our car was beginning to feel the effects of battering about on the Eritrean roads and was pulling badly, a fact which was to have unfortunate results before the day was out. However, at the moment the delays had meant that the General had got well ahead and we were able to take our usual headlong pace to catch him up.

So far the road was strange, but the type of country was familiar—deep gorges and hillsides covered with scattered trees and scrub ; but one last climb hoisted us up into a different world.

We came out on to a great tableland with patches of corn and here and there enormous masses of rock, sometimes hundreds of feet in height, rising sheer out of the plain. At intervals we could see down other hundreds of feet to flat, rich valleys spread out like carpets. The nearer hills suggested the Dolomites, while always in the distance was the great mountain wall of Abyssinia.

Here the road ran level for mile after mile and we were able to follow decorously in the General's wake. There was nothing to suggest military pomp and circumstance ; except for the uniforms of the officers it might have been a picnic party out for a pleasant day. No troops were drawn up to meet the Commander-in-Chief ; the workmen on the road gave the Fascist salute if they happened to look up,



but that they would do out of sheer friendliness to any passing car.

At last we came to a pass commanded by a fort with rough loopholed walls stretching across the narrow strip of level ground, leaving just an opening for the road. The road in front fell steeply away; thousands of feet below we could see a vast plain and the citadel wall of mountains beyond. We wound down in sharp zigzags, and finally reached the bottom of a narrow gorge. Here we had to stop, for even the Commander-in-Chief had to wait while a long convoy of motor-lorries crept round a series of precipitous corners. As we emerged on to the plain, I inquired when we should enter Abyssinia. "But," said Signor Casertano with a laugh, "you are in Abyssinia now." My preconceived ideas were always being upset. I had imagined that at the frontier there would have been some sort of guard provided for the Commander-in-Chief, even if it were only a few motor-cyclists. We had entered what was, at least in theory, enemy territory, and nobody thought of the possibility of danger or possessed any means of defence except the probably empty revolvers strapped to their sides.

Now would have been the moment for some enterprising Abyssinian leader to have captured the Commander-in-Chief and the whole of headquarters staff. On our left stood a walled village; a large group of natives had gathered in front of the gate and watched us with mild interest. Why did they not produce rifles from their draperies, hold up the party and carry us off? The foothills were not far distant, and the only sign of Italian military forces were two mounted Carabinieri jogging peacefully along. It was the perfect setting and opportunity for a dramatic capture. No romantic novelist could have resisted such a

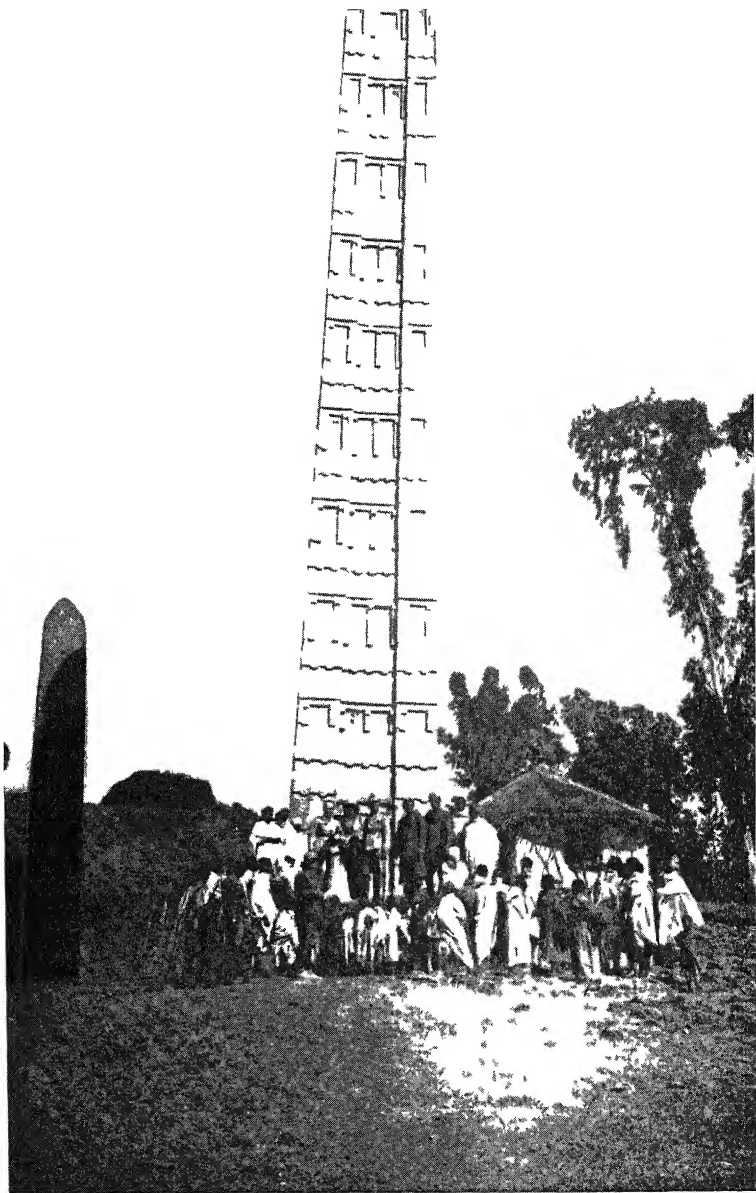
scene and such an incident, but there was no Abyssinian chief to play the dashing villain, and the atmosphere of the picnic continued.

The road had now turned to a sandy tract among corn-fields and pasture, with here and there a tiny stream. At last, after about twenty miles, we saw a little hill surmounted by some ruined buildings. We crested a rise and suddenly came upon some Abyssinian troops drawn up by the roadside; some were in khaki uniform, others in native dress, and all carried modern rifles and wore belts crammed with cartridges. Behind them stood a crowd of natives. The cars slowed down, a dozen mounted Carabinieri swung into the procession and trotted along in front of the General's car for the quarter of a mile which separated us from the fort. At the bottom of the little hill General de Bono left his car. On one side of the road was drawn up a Blackshirt Legion, on the other a detachment of light tanks. The band struck up the "Marcia Reale", and the Commander-in-Chief and his staff climbed up to the ruined gateway of the little fort where once again floated proudly the flag of Italy. Just below it was a colossal portrait of Signor Mussolini which the Blackshirts had brought with them.

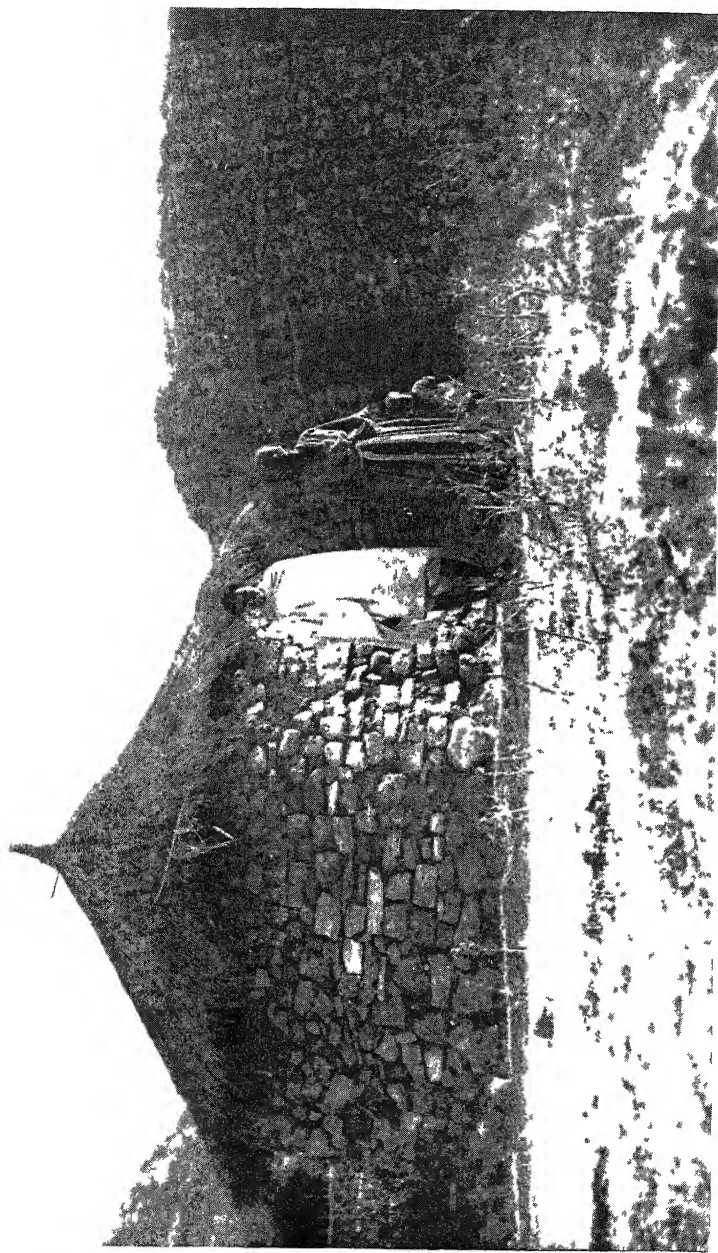
Adigrat is famous in Italian military history for a gallant defence during the war of 1896, when a handful of men held out for two months against overwhelming odds until they were finally relieved by General Baldissari. When the Italians evacuated this part of the country the flag over the fort was lowered for the last time by a certain young lieutenant named Santini; forty years later, as a general, he rehoisted the flag with his own hands. The low stone wall is still practically intact, and the three ruined buildings crown the hill-top. General Santini's

headquarters were in a large tent on a little strip of level ground just below the summit, and in front there was a tiny natural amphitheatre. On every side the land fell sharply away to the plain on which the troops were encamped; on the lower slopes of the hills to the west could be seen the brown huts of the town itself, crowned by the circular thatched roof of the Coptic church, while the walled house of a local chief stood out in splendid isolation between the fort and the town.

The Commander-in-Chief and General Santini retired to the latter's tent, and among the small group of staff officers standing about I saw a broad-shouldered, rather plump Abyssinian clad in a khaki Belgian uniform. "That," somebody whispered in my ear, "is Ras Gugsa." I was entirely unprepared to see the man of whom we had heard so much in the last few days, but I realized that we had come for something more than a formal inspection by the Commander-in-Chief. Presently the Chief was summoned to join the conference in the tent, and from below the fort there arose the sound of the beating of drums and the shrill, monotonous native "song". The armed Abyssinians whom we had seen drawn up by the roadside, and who were now explained as a thousand of Gugsa's followers, had marched up as far as the entrance to the fort accompanied by a group of Coptic priests in their vestments, the Mussulman community with their white flags, and the crowd with the drums. Presently an order was given and Gugsa's men entered the fort, followed by the local chiefs and the priests. They were formed up in a long line, and General de Bono and Ras Gugsa inspected the latter's men, who presented arms smartly under the command of a native officer.



THE GREAT OBELISK AT AXUM



A TYPICAL "TUCUL"

The hot African sun poured down, the tricolour of Italy stood out stiffly in the breeze, the rich plain stretched away to the circle of the mountains, the men of the Blackshirt Legion swarmed over the rocky summit of the hill, and even the natives were awed into silence as the Commander-in-Chief, with Ras Gugsa on his left, took his stand on a broad rock which made a natural platform. His crisp voice rang out : "I have communicated to my Government the fact of the submission of Ras Gugsa, and I have been instructed by Signor Mussolini and the King to appoint Ras Gugsa as Chief of the Tigrai."

At the name of Signor Mussolini all the chiefs began to clap before any translation had been made ; when the translation was finished there was renewed clapping at the news of Gugsa's appointment.

"Your applause shows your pleasure at this decision. He is the rightful heir of Johannis, the former King of the Tigrai. Your loyalty to him and the Italian Government will be rewarded, and any losses you have sustained during the advance of our troops will be repaid. Your religion will be respected. Tell the other inhabitants of the Tigrai that the Italian Government has come to enforce peace and security and invites them to join us. Yesterday our troops entered Axum, the sacred city of the Tigrai. Nothing happens but by the will of God, who is your God and ours. Now swear fealty to Ras Gugsa and the Italian Government."

The fifty chiefs raised their hands with a cry, the Commander-in-Chief saluted, and the parade was dismissed. General de Bono was to entertain Ras Gugsa to lunch. We had brought our provisions with us, and were busy refusing many kind invitations as Signor Casertano

wished to start immediately, but he was carried off to join the Commander-in-Chief and I was taken to the local H.Q. mess. There entered to us a young cinema operator who had landed from Italy the day before and had been sent off to film the ceremony at Adigrat. He was a languid youth with long fair hair and a pale skin, an odd contrast to the officers with their bronzed faces and quick decisive movements. He was obviously too genteel for his company, and afforded much secret amusement first by announcing that he never ate spaghetti (an amazing statement for an Italian), and then by refusing the excellent cold meat and mushrooms in oil that followed. At that he was politely told that he would not get anything else, so he played with it in a ladylike fashion. I thought that he had a good deal to learn about life with an army on active service.

Luncheon over, I wandered off to take some photographs and found myself surrounded by Blackshirts, some of them having also come in the *Biancamano*, but mostly belonging to what would be described in English as "Mussolini's Own". They all belonged to his own district of Forlì and proudly displayed the metal "M" which they wore on the lapel of their tunics. After the usual greetings and inquiries about one another's health, which indeed were unnecessary, as it was obvious that they had never been better in their lives, the talk naturally turned to the question of the road—"their" road. What did I think of it? They had made all twenty-five miles of it in just over three days, now they were pushing on to Makale. I wonder if the soldiers of the Roman Empire were as proud of the roads they made as the men of the Army of East Africa? There had at this time been very little resistance to the Italian advance, none in the case

of General Santini's Army Corps; it had been a war of the spade, not the rifle.

The Commander-in-Chief having started, we set off in haste for Asmara. En route we fell in with some press photographers on their way up to Adigrat, and from them I learnt that my hoped-for successor had not arrived, and that as the only foreigner present at the ceremony I had got what is known in journalistic parlance as "a scoop". But the gods decided that the scoop could not materialize. When we had climbed up once again on to the great plateau, the chauffeur announced that he needed petrol and we stopped at the next dump to fill up; he then told the mechanics that the car was not pulling well and an investigation followed. As a result, a large part of the engine was lifted bodily out despite Signor Casertano's protest.

"It will only take three-quarters of an hour to repair, and the car will not get to Asmara unless it is done."

My heart sank, as I knew those "three-quarters of an hour", and my gloomiest fears were fulfilled as the time lengthened to nearly four hours. It was now pitch dark and bitterly cold, and we decided to stroll up the road to visit the *Commando Tappa*, the opposite number to my friends at Adi Qualà. The talk was quite familiar and homelike—the incessant work of getting up supplies for the Army Corps. We had sent a message to Adi Caieh, the only town on the way to Asmara, ordering that food should be found for us somehow, but dinner seemed to be receding into a very dim distance. We thought with longing of the provisions which we had so light-heartedly given to a member of the staff who had been sent back with the photographers to Adigrat.

Finally the car appeared and we rushed on to Adi



Caieh, where our experiences ceased to be those of daylight and common sense and became purely fantastic. We found a watcher posted at a corner to guide us to what was proudly described as an "hotel" where dinner had been ordered. The "hotel" resolved itself into the local general stores, which had extended its activities to provide a mess for officers. A table had been laid for us in a small "private" passage, and when we disdained such grandeur and penetrated farther we found ourselves in a large room which might have been in any house in an Italian village. It was clearly the pride of the owner's heart: a round table stood in the middle of a circle of chairs, paper flowers hung from the ceiling with the electric light, there were two beds with mid-Victorian counterpanes, and a large gramophone. Having discovered that most of the chairs were made for show and not for use, we turned on the gramophone and played the tunes of ten years ago, while a distinguished Italian diplomat, undaunted by his eighteen-hour day and the thought of the journalists at Asmara, showed his prowess in step-dancing.

To us entered unexpectedly Signor Franco, the former Italian Consul at Adowa, who for a few days had been the most-talked-of man in Eritrea, for there had been considerable anxiety about his fate after the Italian advance. He had, however, reached the Italian lines in safety, but in journalistic circles nothing more was known, and it was pointed out to me, amid laughter, that here was another "scoop" for me if I could write the first interview with Signor Franco. He was a broad-shouldered, tall young man who took his adventures very lightly. When the news of the Italian advance had come he had been removed from the Consulate and had spent the

night in a room with his Abyssinian guards. It had not been exactly pleasant, but minor discomforts were forgotten in the interest of the conversations of the local inhabitants who wandered in and out to talk with his jailers. They were all puzzled by the situation and unable to decide what was the best thing to do. There had been a great deal of propaganda from Addis Ababa declaring that the Italians would seize everything and abolish the Coptic religion; on the other hand, local report spoke well of them.

The next day the authorities had connived at Signor Franco's escape. He had reached the Italian lines without difficulty, and was of opinion that his worst adventure had been running out of petrol in the middle of the night ten miles from Asmara. He had, however, found a deserted and unexplained car and had filled up from its tank. "That," he said with a laugh, "was really the worst thing that happened to me." He was certainly lacking in any desire to dramatize himself and his experiences; not a good subject for an interview!

He was far more interested in the events of the day, for he had known Ras Gugsä for some time and had a high opinion of both his character and his ability. He agreed that the Abyssinian chief had borne himself with dignity in his difficult position during the ceremony at Adigrat that morning. His act of submission would, Signor Franco thought, be followed by many others, as confidence was created by the good treatment of the population by the Italian authorities—an opinion which was borne out by the events of the next few days.

At 10 p.m. our longed-for dinner appeared, and at 11 p.m. we took the road again. We tore down a precipitous slope for over two hours (Adi Caieh is even

higher than Asmara), our headlights showing nothing but the deep blackness of the valleys below us as we took each corner at lightning speed. I was subsequently told that it was the most dangerous road in the colony, with 1700 hairpin bends in thirty-five miles. Having received a stern training in never speaking to the man at the wheel, I made no comment when we twice missed the edge of the drop by a foot, but when I saw the chauffeur apparently driving straight over it I did utter a word of warning; he swung the wheel round, and that time it was a matter of an inch or two. I asked him if he was getting sleepy, and his reply was that he had not noticed because he was avoiding a couple of holes on the other side. I personally felt that I preferred the holes to a drop of some hundreds of feet into a valley.

Thirty miles from Asmara misfortune overtook us. Mercifully it happened on a straight and comparatively level bit of road. There was a sudden and mysterious grinding and the car skidded to a standstill. The chauffeur climbed out, and in a moment presented us with a large part of the engine which "had come to pieces in his hand". There was nothing to be done except hope that someone would come to our rescue, and in a quarter of an hour Signor Franco, whom we had left to sleep at Adi Caieh, appeared. He could give no explanation as to why he had changed his mind, but he must have been inspired by some prevision of our need. I was careful not to remind anyone that the strictest law of the Army was "no civilians in military cars", but I shrank back guiltily when a sentry swung his lantern into the back of the car. However, either my helmet was a sufficient disguise or else he turned a kind and blind eye.

Three o'clock in the morning saw us in Asmara, but

alas, my hope of a "scoop" had vanished; I could not send a telegram at that hour, and in the morning all the pressmen would have the news of the proclamation of Ras Gugsa as Chief of the Tigrai. Such were the fortunes of journalism and motor-cars in Eritrea.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE ROAD TO ADOWA : THE ADVANCE OF THE GAVINANA DIVISION

It had been our intention when we left Coatit to return there that evening, so I had left all my belongings behind me and I found myself in Asmara without the two essentials to a writer's life in Eritrea—my typewriter and my camp bed. Frantic messages were sent, but, owing to casualties to cars, the sudden illness of a lorry-driver, and the exigencies of war-time, days passed and I was a prisoner at Asmara. Tempting offers were made of seats in cars going to Adowa and Entischiò, but had to be refused. I had once left Asmara without my bed, and this had meant playing the cuckoo and turning unfortunate men out of theirs on two successive nights, and I had determined never to do such a thing again. It was not fair on officers on active service who needed a good night's rest. The Press quarters were more crowded than ever, for another batch of journalists had arrived, and discussions raged about telegraph and transport facilities; but my successor had really reached Asmara, and I was thankful to leave the struggle about telegrams in his more capable hands.

Trifles assumed an immense importance in one's life. I met somebody who asked me if I would like a table—a real table at which one could sit—the rarest of luxuries in Eritrea. An incautious motor-driver had left a heap of

empty wooden boxes outside a nearby hut ; one of them was obviously designed to act as a tiny cupboard and to enable me to get some of my possessions off the floor. My room was really becoming overcrowded with furniture.

Asmara itself was giving a mild imitation of a beleaguered town as the shops grew emptier and emptier. The military demands for transport were becoming heavier. Sometimes a few supplies for civilians would get through, and if one was on the spot when they arrived one was able to buy such luxuries as jam and candles. But it was an excellent lesson in the simplification of one's existence. One learnt to get on perfectly well without many things which one had regarded as necessities. Breakfast was a recurring problem and demanded considerable technique. If one sent the "boy" to the nearby hotel too early he came back to say that the milk had not arrived ; if one waited too long there was no bread. To find the exact moment when both bread and milk were to be obtained provided a mild and recurring excitement between 8 and 9 a.m.

What was absolutely lacking was news of the outside world. Instead of reading three or four papers a day, one was dependent on a wireless bulletin which occasionally drifted in to the Press room. Sometimes a copy of the local paper was to be obtained, but otherwise we heard nothing of the questions which were convulsing Europe. Were sanctions to be enforced against Italy ? What form would they take ? Did Great Britain mean to act single-handed ? Would the Air Mail continue to function ? Nobody seemed to know or to care. If such problems were mentioned it was purely from the personal point of view—what would be the position of the handful of British subjects now in Eritrea ? Should we be able

to get any money? Should we be allowed to send articles—or in my case chapters of this book—to England? One kind Italian friend promised us a charming concentration camp and a copy of Shakespeare; as a matter of fact I had my own, and a colleague remarked that what he would prefer was a present of jam.

French and Italian papers arrived at irregular intervals, two and three weeks after the date of publication. Journalists tore them open to see if their articles had been printed and on what page, and then tossed the papers aside unread. The deliberations of a sub-committee at Geneva seemed incredibly removed from the world in which we were living.

What we waited for were the appearances of members of the Press Bureau with news from the occupied territory. There were frequent reports of small chiefs who had come in to make acts of submission, and of parties of priests from the innumerable Coptic churches. Each chief and his followers were allowed to keep their beloved rifles, the chief being regarded as surety for the good conduct and loyalty of his men. This was in accordance with the Ethiopian marriage custom. There is always a guarantor who accepts responsibility for the good conduct of the husband; if he deserts his wife the other man has to support her; so the chiefs were thoroughly acquainted with the system.

Another mild excitement was the news that the Ras Seyum, the representative of the Negus in the Tigrai, was collecting fresh troops and that reinforcements were moving up from Addis Ababa. Beyond the bare fact, the military authorities were naturally not communicative, but junior officers bound by no such considerations of caution frankly hoped that it meant that the Abyssinian forces were going to throw themselves against the three

strong points which had been established. It would save the Italian forces from going in search of the enemy.

On Sunday, October 20, a touching little ceremony took place in Asmara. The remaining survivors of the prisoners of Adowa were invited to present themselves at the local military headquarters. A dozen old men appeared; each had lost his right hand and his left foot. They were lucky men, for the Abyssinians have other and more horrible ways of dealing with prisoners. A company of Ascari and a band were drawn up in their honour. The General and headquarters staff stood at the top of the steps, and he made one of those excellent, simple little speeches of which Italian officers seem to have the secret. He told the old soldiers that Italy had never forgotten their loyalty and their sufferings, and on this occasion, when the defeat of forty years ago had been wiped out by victory, he had been ordered by his Government to make each of them a small present to celebrate the occasion. The General went down the steps and passed along the little line, putting into their left hands envelopes containing 100 lire. Their faces beamed with pride and happiness as the General said a few words to each.

The next day there came the text of the High Commissioner's decree abolishing slavery in the Tigray:

You know that where the Italian flag flies there is liberty. In our country slavery in any form is forbidden. The slaves at present in the Tigray are declared free, and the sale or purchase of slaves is prohibited. Any violation of this decree will be severely punished as it will be contrary to the orders of the Government.

As there was no form of civil administration in the Ethiopian Empire, the Italian authorities had no means



of ascertaining the number of slaves in the Tigrai, but it was made known that compensation would be paid to the owners ; at the same time, it was not expected that many slaves would leave their masters ; they would stay on and work for wages, being free to give notice if they wished to do so.

I wondered if the proclamation would have the effect of damping down enthusiasm for Italian rule and reduce the number of chiefs and priests coming to make acts of submission, but my doubts proved to be quite unfounded. There were no slave-markets in the Tigrai, these being situated in the central and southern provinces. I was told that General de Bono was not surprised at the reception which had been given to the Italian Army, for they had been greeted as liberators from the intolerable requisitions of the Negus and the local governors.

One of the blessings of civilization of which the local population immediately showed its appreciation was speculation in food prices. Chickens which had been sold for seventy centesimi on the first day of the occupation were now being sold for three lire, and the price of eggs had risen proportionately. I wondered what marvellous and ingenious demands for compensation for damage done during the passage of the troops were being prepared. . . .

The return of my wandering luggage and the offer of a seat in a car to Axum were my orders of release from Asmara. The convoy of three cars set out at 5.30 the next morning, containing an assortment of Italian officers, an official photographer, and a French journalist newly landed in Eritrea. I wondered at intervals what he thought of the experiences of the day. I had the good fortune to be in the leading car, which was high powered and high

built, and, while we left the others to "eat our dust", we had to wait at intervals to let them catch up. The road to Adi Qualà was now so familiar that I could note where a hole had been filled up or a rock removed. It was, as the Colonel who was my companion and I agreed, rapidly becoming an *auto strada*. I laughed at luncheon when the French journalist commented on its dangers; what would he think of the next stretch?

We picnicked in a tiny shelter of boughs kindly evacuated for our benefit by its Carabinieri owners close to the Mareb, and crossed the famous river. The narrow, winding track which I had seen nearly three weeks earlier had now widened out into quite a passable military road. Mai Enda Baria, once the headquarters and then a glade in a wood, was now a barren plain invested with motor-lorries. The road began to switch back over steep pitches, coming back again and again to a little mountain stream with flowers and trees and really green grass on its sides. It was delicious to draw up under the shade of a great sycamore and to hear, for the first time since I landed, the sound of running water.

Such joys were soon left behind, and we began the zigzag climb over the first of the two great ranges which lie between the Mareb and Adowa. It was a tremendous engineering feat to have driven the road over the mountains in little more than a few days, but it cannot be said that it provided exactly luxury in the way of motoring. I looked with envy at the long trains of supply mules which were winding up and down. I felt that the mounted officers who accompanied them had really chosen a more suitable and comfortable means of transport.

We had left the Mareb about half past twelve, promising ourselves to be at Adowa at 3 p.m., but just

short of the top of the second pass we became involved in other people's misfortunes. A mixed string of lorries and cars had stopped just short of the summit. We asked our next ahead what was the matter, but with the vague philosophy of the private soldier he could only tell us that something had happened on the road and he had been there for some time.

I thought it would be pleasant to get out and stretch my legs and also to find out what had really happened, so I announced my intention of walking to the top of the pass. I had often read of dust which was "ankle deep", but had always thought that it was merely a form of speech, except in the desert. I now discovered that such a thing was possible. I sank well up to my ankles as I stepped out of the car, but it was possible to scramble along beside the road. Like the tops of all passes, this one was much farther than I thought, but the way was diversified by stopping to talk to the disconsolate drivers of the vehicles I passed. It was finally established that a motor-lorry had caught fire just the other side of the summit and had been burning since 9 a.m. It was hoped that now the remains were sufficiently cold to be thrown over the edge.

Arrived at the top, I found that a small platform had been cut out of the side of the hill, and here and on the road both up and down was a collection of about fifty motor-lorries, so I sat down on the mountain-side to await developments. Below me, as ever, the land fell sheer away to a deep valley, while on every side were tall, rugged peaks. I felt that the French journalist who had said that it would take the Italian forces weeks to fight their way to Adowa had been right in theory even if the event had proved him wrong. Even my ignorant eyes could

see the advantages which the country gave for defence, and I imagined the use which the Boers would have made of it. I asked a senior officer at dinner that night why, even if they were outnumbered and lacked the resources in modern weapons of the Italians, the Abyssinians had not adopted guerilla tactics, which might have caused considerable losses and delays. He explained to me that the Abyssinian is not a "solitary" fighter, he must always be surrounded by his fellows, and only understands mass attacks. It was well for the Italians.

At last the obstruction was hurled off the road and things began to move. Matters were, of course, slowed up by every driver whose lorry was on the little platform jockeying for a place; however, finally our car appeared and I stepped in. Then began a drive which was worse than the worst nightmare. The lorries ahead were having difficulties with the road, and we could only move about fifty yards at a time. How the brakes held on the precipitous slopes I could not imagine. The afternoon sun poured down into the ravine and the dust rose in a solid wall all round us. When it cleared at intervals we could see the convoy creeping up the zigzags of the opposite hillside like gigantic ants. The head of the column stuck just below the crest, while we could watch other lorries reversing with their back wheels apparently over the edge of the precipices as they tried to get round the bends. I thought that we should be lucky if we saw Adowa at midnight, and wondered what the French journalist felt; however, somebody pushed or pulled the obstructionist up the last slope, and our crawl began again.

I thought that I had become habituated to the wildness and ruggedness of the country in this part of East Africa, the sheer hillsides covered with scrub and stones,

but the sixty miles between the Mareb and Adowa surpassed anything that I had seen.

A few days later I asked General Villa Santa, whose Gavinana Division had led the advance, why the Abyssinians had not made a more serious resistance. "We surprised them," he said; "they thought that no white men could march over such country." I felt that the Abyssinians had been justified in their ideas. Although I did not know it at the time, the military road on which we were followed the line of the march of the left column of the Division, but I realized that it was here or hereabouts that the Army Corps must have passed, and I could only marvel at their spirit and endurance. I wanted an accurate story of what had happened, and one evening at Adowa inquired of General Villa Santa where such a thing was to be found. "So far," he replied, "I have not seen anything that is correct. I will let you have something."

I imagined that the General meant that he would give me an official document from which I could make extracts, instead of which I was to find that he himself had written the history of the operations for me. It was an act of kindness and an honour for which I found it difficult to express my gratitude. All those who know (as I said in a previous chapter) how unnecessarily bitter has been the memory of the defeat of Adowa to the Italian nation will realize the pride and joy of the Gavinana Division at being ordered to lead the advance of the Second Army Corps. Here is the story in General Villa Santa's own words:

DIVISIONAL ORDER NO. 33.

*Subject* :—THE OFFENSIVE.

*Adi Qualà,*

Oct. 2, 1935.

Tomorrow at dawn we shall cross the Mareb, the river which has for almost forty years been the symbol and the sign of a disastrous

peace. We shall advance into Ethiopian territory among those hills where still lie unburied the bones of the glorious dead of Adowa. We will revenge those dead ; we will show to all the world that today Italy has very different leaders, and that we are prepared at the cost of every sacrifice to increase the power, the greatness, and the honour of our country. The shout of joy with which you greeted the order to advance shows that you appreciate the glory of the task which has been entrusted to you, that your morale is high, that your will is unbreakable, and that your enthusiasm will carry you to victory.

Men of the Gavinana ! Every citizen of Florence is wishing you good fortune ; the spirit of the Ferrucci is with you ; the whole of Italy is behind you !

Remember our country, our King, and our leader. Let us promise silently to those who are dear to us, and who are awaiting our victory, that we will be worthy of their hopes and their loving wishes.

Forward !

NINO VILLA SANTA,  
*General.*

(It should be explained that the Gavinana Division is composed almost entirely of officers and men from Tuscany.)

THE OPERATIONS OF THE GAVINANA DIVISION WHICH LED TO THE  
RECONQUEST OF ADOWA. OCT. 3-6, 1935.

The Gavinana Division, composed of the 70th, 83rd, and 84th Infantry Regiments, of the 19th Regiment of Artillery, of the 519th Machine-Gun Battalion, with detachments of Engineers, Medical, and Supply Services, began the passage of the Mareb at 5 a.m. on October 3rd, having marched from the district of Adi Qualà—Adi Ugri, where they had been in camp for some days.

(The General told me that the last man crossed the Mareb between 2 and 3 p.m.)

The General commanding the Division issued the Order 33 [quoted above] on the evening of October 2nd. The soldiers received the news that the advance was at last to begin with shouts of delight, which showed their high morale and their enthusiasm for the task which was entrusted to them.

The Division was preceded by a squadron of light tanks and the irregular native troops of the Saraè, who acted as scouts. On the right flank following another mule-track was the 18th Eritrean Battalion and on the left the 23rd Eritrean Battalion.

The advance guard first came into contact with the enemy on the height of Ramà, when a skirmish took place with two hundred armed Abyssinians, who quickly retreated, leaving dead and wounded on the ground.

At 3 p.m. the scouts reached the line Darò Taclé—Adi Feredà, and the advance guard the cross-roads at Mai Enda Baria. Near the small fort of Darò Taclé the head of the column was unexpectedly attacked by large parties of the enemy which were estimated to number over a thousand. Lieutenant Mario Morgantini, commanding the irregular troops of the Seraè, was killed, together with sixteen of his men, while others were wounded. With the help of the advance guard, the Abyssinians were beaten off and were afraid to attack the column again, which encamped in the vicinity of Mai Enda Baria.

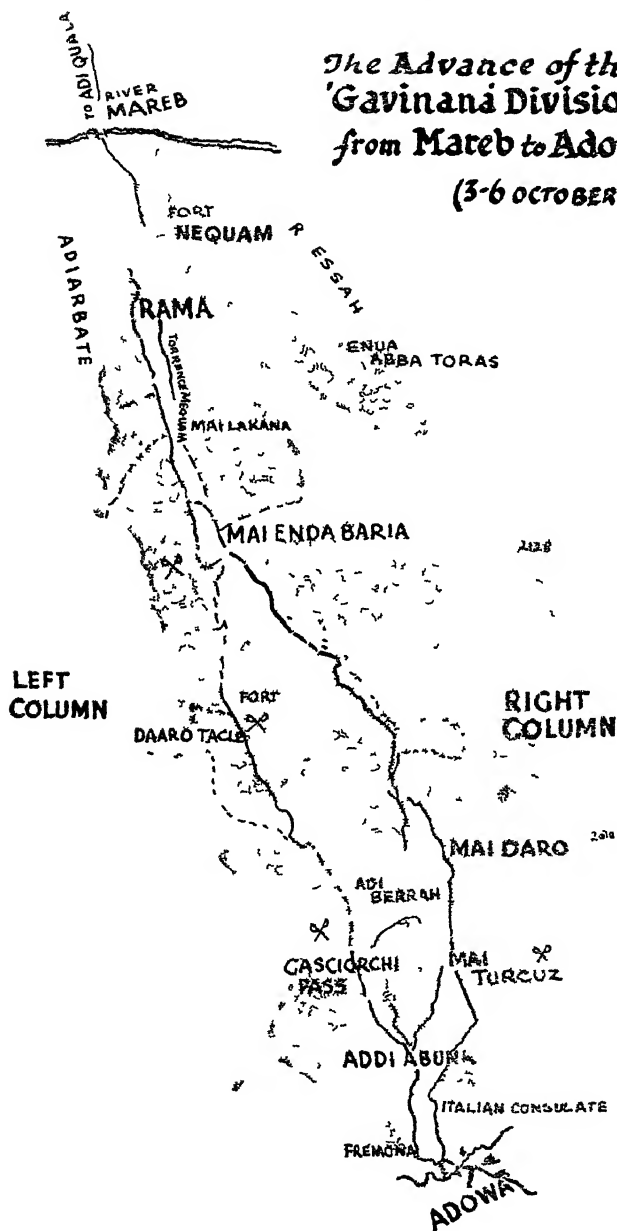
On the morning of October 4th the Gavinana Division continued to advance in two columns: that on the right, which was formed of the 70th Infantry with the 2nd Group of the 19th Artillery and the 519th Machine-Gun Battalion, followed the mule-track which led by the Gasciorchi Pass to Adi Abuna and the Plain of Adowa; the left column, formed of the 84th and 83rd Infantry and the 1st and 3rd Groups of the 19th Artillery, followed instead the mule-track which led from Mai Enda Baria by Mai Ceu, Mai Darò, Mai Scianà, Mai Turcuz, and joined the other mule-track at Adi Abuna.

These dispositions were based on the following strategical conceptions: the right column was to attack the enemy forces on the Gasciorchi Pass where the strongest resistance was expected, as it lay on the most direct road to Adowa; the left column, which was the stronger, was, on the other hand, to march round the Gasciorchi Pass by the Mai Ceu—Mai Darò mule-track to take the defenders of the pass in the rear, who would be obliged either to retreat or to surrender.

In order that this plan should be successful, it was essential that the left column should march with the greatest possible rapidity regardless of the attacks of enemy units, who were naturally anxious to delay the advance on their exposed left flank.

Ras Seyum Mangascia, the Commander of the Abyssinian Forces, had under his orders two bodies of men: one about two thousand strong on the Gasciorchi Pass, and the other on Monte Sullodà of

*The Advance of the  
'Gavinana' Division  
from Mareb to Adowa*  
(3-6 OCTOBER 1935)





about eight thousand men with machine-guns and cannon, and about two thousand men in reserve on the heights of Adowa near his "palace". The rapid advance of the left column had also as its objective the prevention of the junction of these two bodies, and to force them either to retreat or to fight separately.

Ras Seyum did not believe that it would be possible for the Italians to advance with such rapidity, given the very difficult conditions of the ground, and he thought, therefore, that he had plenty of time to prepare his defence. As a matter of fact, the rapidity of the advance of the left column took him completely by surprise, and when on the evening of October 5th the column itself reached Adi Abuna, while its scouts were at the Italian Consulate at Adowa, and some even at the entrance to the town, he decided to abandon his positions before the two columns cut off his retreat.

The General of the Gavinana Division was preparing to send the 83rd Infantry Regiment, which formed his reserves, by way of Monte Aiti Udducò and the small pass to the west of Monte Sullodà in order to reach the heights of Adowa from the south-east, and to isolate Ras Seyum and his two thousand men in his "palace". Ras Seyum, however, fled hastily without attempting any resistance. On the morning of October 6th the left column of the Gavinana Division entered the plain of Adowa and, led by General Villa Santa, who had joined the advance guard in order to encourage the men during their forced march, reached the town of Adowa at 10.30 a.m. At noon General Villa Santa hoisted the Italian flag over the palace.

The effect of this strategy was that the defenders of the Gasciorchi Pass, who had been defeated in an action close to the pass, retreated hastily towards Axum, so that the way was left open for the right column, which was able to follow the left column into the town.

With the occupation of Adowa the Italians revenged the dead of the unhappy first of March, 1896, which for forty years had been so bitter a memory for Italy, although that bloody battle had really been a matter for pride when it is remembered that 12,000 Italians had faced 123,000 Abyssinians commanded by Menelik II.

The Order of the Day (No. 34) recorded the victory and recalled the memory of the heroes who had fallen amongst the same hills, in whose honour a memorial was immediately erected by their comrades of the new Italy.

This memorial took the form of an obelisk on which are carved the following words :

"To those who fell at Adowa—March 1st, 1896—today revenged by the Victory of October 6th, 1935—XIII—The Division Gavinana".

The monument was unveiled by H. E. General De Bono, October 14th . . .

In General Villa Santa's account the word which he uses for the tracks over the mountains is *mulattiera*, which the dictionary says should be translated "bridle-path", but that word suggests to my mind the pleasant, kindly ways in England; even "mule-track" hardly conveys the precipitous courses of these paths; indeed, I should have thought that nothing but goats could have climbed them, and yet the Gavinana Division marched sixty miles over the mountains from the Mareb to Adowa in three days. A week later the military road was completed and General de Bono was able to motor up. No wonder General Villa Santa was proud of his men.

A phrase of General Villa Santa's narrative threw a light on a little episode of my dinner with one of his staff near the Mareb on the night of October 5. The Colonel in question had spent a considerable time in ringing up everyone within range of the field telephone to ascertain the whereabouts of his General; even the Army Corps headquarters professed complete ignorance. I told General Villa Santa one night of this pathetic search for him on the telephone, at which he was much amused, but he did not give any explanation as to why he could not be found. The reason is now made clear by his own story; he was up with the advance guard. He gives the excellent reason that he wished to encourage his men, but a study of his character makes me believe that there was also another, unconfessed, reason—a determination to share the difficulties and dangers instead of being ensconced somewhere in the rear, which I have

been assured is the correct position for a Divisional General in modern war—but neither war nor life conformed to conventional patterns in the Tigrai.

All this knowledge was of course revealed to me much later, and I had no idea of the good fortune in store for me when we drove up to General Maravigna's headquarters in the Italian Consulate at Adowa. I had often wondered what nectar or ambrosia was like, and I came to the conclusion that the best qualities of both must be combined in the cup of black coffee which we were given at the mess. The Consulate which Signor Franco had been so anxious I should see was a red stone villa ; there were a number of stone outbuildings, and the whole compound was filled with tents. The town of Adowa itself is about two miles off. The wide, irregular plain stretches away on every side ; each rise seemed to be crowned with ruins ; to the south are mountains and all around are low hills—or at least hills which are low for this country, anywhere else they would make a respectable showing. Below the Consulate was the stream which winds in a deep watercourse beneath the town and across the plateau.

The luggage was cleared out of the cars—it was by this time far too late to think of going to Axum and I wondered what was going to happen next—a strange officer appeared, we all re-embarked and proceeded to drive across the plain until we came to the simple granite obelisk which the Gavinana Division had erected in honour of the men who had fallen in the first battle of Adowa. The "strange officer" was General Villa Santa, who had been kidnapped by the official photographer, who wished to take photographs of him beside the monument,

Cameras clicked all round, and when at last everyone was satisfied the General asked what we would like to do next ; would we care to climb up to the ruined building on the hill above ? While other people were politely silent, I put in an enthusiastic "yes". Some ragged walls were all that remained of what had been a palace of the famous King Johannis who had once ruled vast tracts of what is now Abyssinia. Monte Sullodà was behind us, away to our left the brown roofs of Adowa were huddled on their little hills, in front was another hill crowned with yet more ruins which dated from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the Portuguese were a power in the land. A battery of artillery was established in the fort which commanded the whole plain.

"Ras Seyum had 8000 men here and another couple of thousand at Adowa itself, but we outmanœuvred him and he fled," remarked the General simply. It was all that I heard for the moment of the advance, but his words brought back the realities of the situation ; when one saw the peasants going peacefully about their work or hobnobbing with the Italian soldiers one was apt to forget that one was not simply assisting at military manœuvres in a strange country.

That night the whole party were entertained to dinner by General Villa Santa at his mess in one of the out-buildings of the Consulate, and I recovered my friend from the Mareb. I was once again awarded brevet rank as a Florentine, but I did not know then how many happy and interesting hours I was to spend within the white-washed walls of the shed.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LIBERATORS

THE following morning we set out at dawn (as usual) on the way to Axum. The road wound over a fertile plain with little streams and trees and patches of gold and silver corn, while the distant mountains were a deep blue in the morning light. It was pleasant to see a rich and smiling country again. The road had been made in two days, and on every little hill were soldiers smoothing out corners or improving the surface; it was child's play compared to the other roads they had made.

To the European mind the word "town" suggests streets, houses, public buildings, shops, and a thousand other things. Axum was my first lesson in the different meaning which the word has in Abyssinia. It is the "sacred city" not only of the Tigray but of the whole Empire of Ethiopia; the present Negus is the first king not to be crowned in its famous church, and I was told that much of the discontent of the priests with his rule was the result of this omission.

The church itself is a hideous erection of the mid-nineteenth century, but is said to be built on the foundations of the first Christian church in Abyssinia. It is reported to contain fabulous treasures, among them being the Tables of the Law and the Ark of David, both of which the Queen of Sheba is said by some means or other to have brought back with her from Jerusalem.



*Above* RAS GUGSA'S MEN ON THE ROAD TO MAKALÉ  
*Below* THE BLACK SHIRTS LEADING THE ADVANCE



*Above* THE PALACE OF KING JOHANNIS AT MAKALÉ  
*Below.* FORT GALLIANO AT MAKALÉ

The highest honour which the priests could pay to General Maravigna when he went to receive their act of submission was to lift a corner of a magnificently embroidered covering and show him a glimpse of the "Ark". I was assured by experts that eighteen hundred years ago Axum boasted a great civilization of which practically nothing is known, and that it will provide a new paradise for archæologists, who, amongst other problems, will have to discover how its inhabitants managed to erect the largest granite monolith in the world. But whatever its civilization may have been in A.D. 100, its present population has long since forgotten the meaning of the word.

To the east of the town rises a steep conical hill, and on the north there is a long, low ridge, but on the other sides the plain sweeps up to the edge of the town; there was a wide road possible for a motor-car, and actually one dark cavern which represented the "general store" of Axum. On every side there rose the rough stone walls or high hedges within which are built the native huts, the winding alleys being just wide enough for two people to pass. There is one entrance to each of these large compounds, which vary in size according to the number of huts they contain. I had seen the same form of "town planning" in the villages, but did not realize that it was a universal system.

When we got out of our cars we were immediately surrounded by a crowd composed to a large extent of the armed followers of a chief who had come to make his act of submission. He himself was mounted on a handsome mule, and his rifle was carried in front of him, covered first of all with a cotton and then with a velvet bag. It was a curious sight, the handful of Italian officers



in the middle of this armed, gesticulating crowd, who apparently regarded it as part of the day's entertainment to be photographed in every possible position, and who went and found friends to come and join in the fun.

At last even the official photographer was satisfied, and we walked through one of the narrow alleys to the irregular courtyard in front of the church. Here stood a collection of low obelisks, and everywhere were priests lounging about. My appearance created a stir and much conversation and gesticulation; finally an Ascari non-commissioned officer was sent to say that it was absolutely forbidden for women to enter the church, so that all I saw was the high wall and crenelated gateway which led to the inner courtyard. The French journalist subsequently told me that he had not seen anything of the slightest interest, and that the outstanding feature was the dirt. In an open space near the church stands the great granite monolith with curious and rather ugly carvings on its face; it must be about eighty feet in height.

On our way back we stopped at an imitation of an Italian villa which had been built for one of the former governors and stood just outside the town. Here we found a representative of the civil administration who was being kept busy all day receiving the chiefs and priests who came to make their acts of submission. A party of the latter came in procession up the straight acacia avenue just as we were leaving. Viewed close to, the vestments of the priests and their attendants are incredibly cheap and gaudy, but in the distance under the brilliant sun they presented a bright-coloured show.

Back at Adowa there arose the question: What was I to do? The Colonel and the cars were returning at once to Asmara, but I felt that there was still much to see at

Adowa. A tent was most kindly found for me in the compound, and I became the guest of the headquarters mess of the Gavinana Division.

That afternoon I was taken and introduced to the Commissioner in charge of the local civil administration, established in the formal Consular offices. He too was receiving the local leaders who wished to make their submission to the Italian authorities. I was invited to sit down and hear what they had to say. The first group consisted of tall men with aquiline features, and though they were as black as the local inhabitants, they were obviously of a higher type. They were Mussulmen and merchants who came from a distant part of the unoccupied territory of the province.

Why had they come?

They knew all about the Italians. They were just rulers, life was secure, taxation was light, there was freedom for all under their government, they wished to become Italian subjects. Would the Italian Army please advance immediately into their district?

"That," interjected the Commissioner, "is what they all ask us."

The leader, a fine, dignified old man with a white beard, put a most interesting question. He had heard about the proclamation liberating the slaves, to which he apparently had no objection; what he wanted to know was whether he could keep his until he had got in the harvest?

The Commissioner explained kindly but quite firmly that this was impossible; they must be free to leave if they desired to do so, and if they stayed they must be paid.

The old man accepted the ruling without a word of complaint. Taxation in this part of the province, apart

from requisitions, amounted to the value of fifty lire a head, while in Eritrea it was only five lire a head a year—an additional and a very practical reason for preferring Italian rule.

The Mussulmen were followed by a group of Coptic priests. On their entry the Commissioner rose and kissed the processional crosses that they carried. One of them, who was lame and a hunchback, had come five days' march; he was impressed and a little frightened, but there was something that he wanted and he was obviously not going to leave till he got it. Could he have a piece of paper—he wanted "a writing". Evidently he thought of this as a protection, or a charm against evil fortune.

One of the officials took a sheet of paper with "Government of Eritrea" printed on the top, typed a few words, put an official stamp at the bottom and handed it to the man, who hid it in his clothes and left with protestations of gratitude and loyalty.

The next party to be admitted was composed of local chiefs also from unoccupied territory. Their plea was the same: Would the Italians please advance immediately? Deserters from Ras Seyum's forces were taking to a life of brigandage and robbing the countryside, and generally making themselves a nuisance.

Nothing the Italian forces would have liked better than to advance, but the problem of communications and transport remained; mules and motor-lorries were both feeling the effects of toiling over the mountains with heavy loads.

It had been arranged that an open-air cinema performance should be given for the benefit of the natives and some of the troops, on the plain between headquarters and Adowa. The Commissioner asked me if I would care to

go with him, as he was anxious to see how the natives would "take it". We mounted big donkeys and set off, led by an Ascari with a lantern.

The screen had been erected on a level space, and while the soldiers sat on a bank behind it the natives squatted in a large semicircle round us. The priests arrived in procession as for a religious ceremony, and my attention was much distracted from the news-reels, of which the programme was composed, by trying to imagine what these people, who had never seen a cinema before, thought of the whole thing. Some pictures of boxing in London were the success of the evening, every blow that got home was received with laughter, while the knock-out was greeted with delight. There was a film of an open-air entertainment given for the patients in a Berlin hospital in which the chief item was a performance by some rather vulgar clowns. This amused the natives intensely, to my great surprise. But I wondered what a people who had never seen the sea made of the pictures of the Italian naval manœuvres. The conduct of the soldiers was very different to what would have been the conduct of British soldiers in the same circumstances; there were no cheerful shouts and jokes, no cheers for popular favourites when they appeared on the screen, but a complete and total silence.

We rode home through the thick dust kicked up by thousands of feet, and here and there the rifle-barrels glinted in the light of a lantern; above our heads a search-light swept the distant mountain-sides. It was certainly a dream to be jogging home from a cinema performance at Adowa.

The next morning I was taken to see the Infirmary which had immediately been opened by General Villa Santa for the natives in the town of Adowa. We passed a

market outside the town where officers and men were busy shopping, though there seemed to be but little to buy. We forded the little river and rode up alleys, which resembled the rocky courses of tiny streams, to a small level space on top of one of the little hills of the town. Here had been erected a tent belonging to a field hospital of the Gavinana Division, and a crowd of natives were standing and sitting about under the shade of a tree near by, while others leant against the tiny wired enclosure which kept them from actually swarming into the tent.

"We had to put up this little bit of wire to keep off the crowd, otherwise we should never be able to move," laughed the doctor in charge.

I penetrated into the tent, where one Army Medical Service man was anointing the hands of a boy with horrible sores, while another was on his knees attending to the toes of a baby which was sitting on its mother's lap. The little creature gave tiny whimpers—"Di-di"—quite different from the crying of a European baby, who would have roared lustily as the iodine stung. The minute bandages were put on with the greatest gentleness, while the doctor amused the baby and the mother looked on contentedly. It was an unceasing source of interest and surprise to me, the absolute confidence that this extraordinarily ignorant and backward population had in the Italian doctors. A European is not allowed to look in at the door of a native hut for fear that his glance will bring bad luck, and I should have imagined that all the appliances and methods of modern medicine would have been looked upon as the works of the devil. Instead of this, the people will allow the Italian doctors to do anything that they consider necessary.

This section of a field hospital had been set up as a purely temporary measure, and my companion was the civilian

doctor attached to the civil administration, who was to be responsible for the organization of a permanent dispensary. While he discussed medical matters with his military colleagues, I wandered off to see the large church which stood inside its ring of walls just above us. If larger, it seemed to be less interesting than the one at Adi Qualà. I did not see any pictures of Italian generals as Coptic saints, though very possibly General Villa Santa will figure there in the future in remembrance of the medical work he started in Adowa.

Our mounts scrambled down another lane, and then up to the top of a higher hill which was crowned with what is grandly described as the "palace" of Ras Seyum. It consisted of a collection of buildings of various sizes and states of repair, the largest being the audience hall, with a Lion of Judah painted on the wall and a dilapidated brass bedstead which had apparently served as a throne. In another building there were actually some stairs which led up to what had been the bedroom of his wife. Beside this was a small chamber which the Italians had found fitted with all the usual appurtenances of a bathroom, but without any pipes. The bath, it need hardly be said, had been annexed by a general, while a passion for souvenirs had removed most of the other contents of the palace, such as they had been.

General Villa Santa told me that on the first night the Italians had entered Adowa he had left a detachment to hold the "palace", and had told two of his officers to sleep in the "best bedroom". At 2 a.m. they had rushed out into the courtyard declaring that not one moment more could they face the animals, and demanding that they should immediately be provided with baths, otherwise they would never be clean again. "And this," remarked the General, "was the bedroom of the Princess."

Whatever may have been the deficiencies of the domestic arrangements of the "palace", there could be no doubt about the beauty and the strength of its position. On a lower slope were the beehive huts of the Ras's personal troops, while on every other side the ground fell steeply away. One looked out over the high wall which encircled the summit, over the brown roofs huddled on the two lower hills, and away across the plain to the surrounding mountains.

The doctor was busy inspecting the buildings, with the immediate intention that, after a cleaning which would cast that of the Augean stables into the shade, he would annex the palace for his dispensary; certainly an ideal site. One day perhaps a larger hospital will stand there.

As we rode home I saw a great party of armed men crossing the plain with mounted chiefs among them, and I wondered who were arriving to call on the Commissioner. That afternoon some instinct sent me to his office at the very moment when two middle-aged men and a little boy entered. The story that they told took one straight back to the early Middle Ages. The boy of nine was the eldest surviving son of a well-known and powerful chief of the Tigrai, Ghere Selassie, who had died four years ago. Ras Seyum was the hereditary enemy of his family, and these men, one of whom was little Ligg Zaraburuc's tutor and guardian and the other a representative of the clan, had come to put the boy under the protection of the Italian Government, to which his father had always been favourable. The two middle-aged men seemed devoted to the boy, and I imagined thought him in danger from Ras Seyum, so had sought the only means of protecting him.

The child bore himself with a certain dignity, and the Commissioner received him with the honour due to an

important chief. He explained to the tutor and counsellor that the Italian Government remembered his father's friendship and would extend its protection to the son. They wished the chiefs to grow up well-educated and wise men, capable of leading their people ; he therefore proposed, if they agreed, to send the boy to Italy to be educated.

One of the men exclaimed : "That is what I have always wanted, education."

They wished to return the next morning to talk to the boy's mother, but the Commissioner suggested that they should come and see him again before doing that in order to discuss matters further. The child whose future life was being decided sat quite still, staring about him with quick, observant eyes. The Commissioner ordered refreshments to be brought for the boy and his attendants. A tin of apricots was opened and some were given to him ; the plate and the spoon were evidently complete novelties, and he waited to see what ought to be done. One of the men cut up the apricots for him and then put a piece into his mouth, after which the little chief took the strange implement and managed it with complete success. The Commissioner poured out some drinks and handed them to the counsellors, one of whom remarked : "But this is an honour, that a great chief should serve us himself."

"Tell him," the Commissioner said to the interpreter, "that in my country the host waits on his guests ; it is a thing the boy must learn."

There was one last request : would the Commissioner show himself to their followers ? Evidently this was to be the proof that their mission had been successful. Some of the minor chiefs had been admitted to the little forecourt, while the sixty or seventy armed men of the escort crowded up to the low wall. The boy stood hand in hand with the



Commissioner and the leaders beamed in the background ; they had found a protector for the young chief. Italy, for her part, was attaching another powerful family in the Tigrai to her interest.

Reports of the movements of Ras Seyum continued to arrive. He was gathering forces in the district of Tembien to the south of the Italian lines ; did he really mean to attack ? Other reinforcements were coming up from Addis Ababa under the command of Ras Cassa, with whom Ras Seyum had alternately collaborated and quarrelled for months. A study of the internal politics of the Tigrai, and the relations between various chiefs and the Negus, made one's head reel ; sometimes they were friends and allies, determined at all costs to defend their country ; then one or other would begin intriguing with the Italians, or they would fight among themselves, or they would join hands against the Negus. The touching picture of a handful of devoted patriots ready to sacrifice everything in a desperate struggle for liberty became a matter for laughter ; they seemed all to be ambitious, greedy, and treacherous.

I had been invited to establish myself and my typewriter in a corner of one of the Divisional offices, and here I had an opportunity of studying yet another side of the work of an army in the field. Natives of all types drifted in. Some were old friends who had come to report what they had seen and heard on expeditions into unoccupied territory ; they, of course, had known what information to collect and were dealt with quickly.

The strangers were a more difficult matter. Had they come merely out of curiosity or in search of "easy money" ? Had they really news of any value to impart ? The cross-examination was sometimes a lengthy business ; first of all, what were their names and where did they come from ?

There would be a gabble of a name and then a hunt for it on a very large-scale map. How long had they been on the road? This was a very difficult question to answer, as the natives have practically no idea of time, and one day more or less makes very little impression on them. Had they seen any soldiers? Then the trouble really began. It was almost impossible to discover whether they were referring to Imperial troops, local levies, or what are vaguely described as "armed bands". On the question of requisitions they were naturally much more precise and extremely eloquent—the soldiers had taken so much corn, so many beasts, and they had not been paid. All the information had to be sifted, weighed, collated, and passed on to higher quarters.

The political office was working overtime, and the crowd outside never seemed to diminish as chiefs and priests and liberated slaves, and everyone in the countryside who had a problem to be solved came and squatted around the compound. The slaves were perhaps the most touching visitors. One was shown in, and before he said a word he insisted on kissing the feet not only of the two Italian officials but also my feet. He then explained that he had come to thank the Italian Government for his freedom; he had been chained wrist to ankle, had had to work in the fields while his master beat him with a heavy stick. He was given a thaler and told to go and enjoy himself a little. I wondered if there was a happier man in the world at that moment.

The kindness and the patience of the political officers seemed to be inexhaustible; they were accessible to all; they would listen to the most long and incredibly confused stories, would disentangle the meaning and decide what had best be done; equally they were not to be imposed upon, and were very quick in summing-up their visitors. No detail

was too small for their attention. Two men arrived who explained that they had found three cows straying on a certain mountain and thought that the cattle had been left behind when Ras Seyum retreated, driving off most of the local herds with him. The men did not know to whom these cows belonged, so they had brought them to the political offices.

"Pay the men something for their trouble ; and register the cows so that their owner may be found if possible." Nobody was to suffer from a sense of grievance if the political office could help it.

The next morning was Sunday, and Mass was celebrated on a piece of level land beside the river ; the altar was set up in a small tent, while two sentries with fixed bayonets stood on either side of the entrance. Attendance was voluntary, and officers and men formed up on each side and facing the open entrance of the tent. The sermon was short and admirably adapted both to the congregation and the circumstances—the duties and responsibilities of an army of occupation as Christians and as representatives of their country. At the elevation of the Host a bugle sounded and the sentries presented arms and the congregation sprang to attention.

The last parade service I had attended had been on the Downs above Winchester twenty years before, when a brigade had been under orders to proceed to France. The superficial differences were so great—creed, nationality, setting, the unfamiliar Latin of the Mass—but they were trivial and unimportant compared with what links all Christian soldiers in service to God and their country.

Mass over, I set out with the officers of the political service to see the distribution of alms to the poor of Adowa. We found a collection of beggars of both sexes and all

stages of decrepitude seated in a long row in the old market-place ; behind them were a number of the more prosperous inhabitants, while the small boys were drawn up a little distance away.

Assisted by our small escort of Ascari, who had carried bags of thalers, we tried to reduce beggars and crowd to some kind of order. We were successful, it seeming that each beggar got his or her thaler, but the fun really began with the small boys. One of the Italian officers started throwing the coins for the boys to race for, and the scene which followed resembled the pictures of the tossing of the pancake at Westminster School on Shrove Tuesday. Very soon the important inhabitants and the beggars threw dignities and infirmities to the winds, and one became submerged in rushes of the crowd, the attendant cinema camera was in danger of being swept away like chaff, and even the Ascari and big donkeys afforded but little protection.

At last the thalers were exhausted, and laughing and breathless we extricated ourselves from the crowd. We rode up to see how the cleansing of Ras Seyum's "palace" was getting on, and on the way back my companions began to plan all that they would do for the inhabitants in the way of health services and education "and teaching them to be clean"! Affection and a strong sense of duty towards the ignorant and helpless population seem to animate all the officers of the political service. "Wait till the troops have gone and we can really get to work. Won't you come back in two years and see what we have been able to do for the people?" I promised to do my best to visit the Tigrai again to see the result of their labours.

In the afternoon we once again went to Adowa, this time to call on the stepmother of Ras Seyum, who had just

arrived by motor-lorry from Axum ; I felt that nothing smaller in the way of a conveyance could have transported the "Princess", who was one of the fattest women I had ever seen. She was now established in one of a small collection of huts just below the "palace" of Ras Seyum ; carpets had been spread on the earth floor and she sat, an enormous white bundle, on a divan. She was seriously "indisposed" by her first experience of going in a motor vehicle—remembering the road from Axum, and thinking what it would have been like to have made the journey in a springless motor-lorry, I felt the deepest sympathy for her.

The Commissioner asked whether in the future she would prefer to live at Axum or at Adowa, a question to which she made the baffling reply that she wished to die at Axum. However, there were some holy waters at Adowa which sometimes did her some good (expressive gestures to head and stomach explained that she suffered in both portions of her anatomy), and apparently she was contented to remain where she was for the present.

There followed a political conversation which was not productive of much information ; she had never been on good terms with her stepson, of whom she evidently entertained a low opinion ; she had always been friendly to Italy herself, even in the days of the first battle of Adowa, when her husband had fought against that country ; as for Ras Seyum, he had bad advisers and she had no influence with him. Old, fat, and ignorant, she, who had been the wife of one of the richest and greatest chiefs in Abyssinia, was now reduced to absolute indigency, and yet she bore herself with a certain instinctive dignity, while the Italian Commissioner treated her with respect, kindness, and sympathy. One matter for pride remained to her : her grandfather had been a "Roman". This statement considerably puzzled

the Commissioner, but subsequent discussion revealed that he had really been a Greek. To the inhabitants of the Tigris all Europeans are "Romans".

Once again the problem of getting back to Asmara began to present itself. I could not, unfortunately, join the headquarters staff of the Gavina Division for "the duration of the war", but a visit which was to have been for two days lengthened itself out into over a week. The suggestion that I might go down by motor-lorry was firmly negatived, and I was assured that a car would be available "one day soon". Meanwhile, my education in the immense variety of types of the Italian Army officer was continued unconsciously by the General. He was a Florentine by adoption, coming, as a matter of fact, from Sardinia. I had always imagined that Sardinians were dark-haired and dark-eyed, but General Villa Santa had light-brown hair, a fair skin, and blue eyes.

He also upset my preconceived ideas that chaff was an exclusively English form of fun, not indulged in by Italians. One of the senior officers, who was obviously devoted to his wife and family, was credited by the General with a longing to return to Asmara, where, by some dark means known only to himself, he had become engaged to a native woman. The story grew until the Major in question was supposed to have fiancées in every town through which the Division had passed, in addition to the broken hearts he had left behind in Italy. The perfect type of the modern Don Giovanni was gradually built up; but the General never left any doubt in my mind as to his real liking and respect for the hero of this amusing and preposterous legend, who evidently enjoyed the nonsense as much as anyone else. A promise was extracted from me that the story should be told in this book. "And then," said the

General gleefully, "your book must be translated into Italian and he will get enormous damages out of you for defamation of character."

The General provided other surprises; he confessed to a secret passion for passing examinations; in addition to having been first in apparently every Army examination, he admitted with some confusion that he had found time to qualify as a barrister and to be a doctor of political economy and social sciences. "I never quite knew," he said, "what the military authorities would think of me, whether the Ministry of War would approve of a soldier who took an interest in such things." But his decorations for bravery in the field would have convinced the most suspicious military authorities that General Villa Santa was a fighter as well as a student.

At the moment his mind, apart from his professional duties, was chiefly preoccupied with finding ways and means of caring for the small children at Adowa, as he was horrified at their condition. They were filthy, half-starved, and entirely neglected. He went himself to supervise the distribution of bread for them and flour for their mothers; he inspected a school which had been founded by a Swedish Mission, which did not in any way come up to his ideas of what was needed. He discovered what he thought was an ideal site for a "Children's Home" in a confiscated orchard which had belonged to Ras Seyum, and came back to consider afresh what he could do for the unfortunate little creatures.

"When I was in the Trentino after the World War," he told me, "I found a lot of deserted and starving children, and I organized schools and orphanages for them. I had one clerk and no committees, and we used to work most of the night and we got things done. But then it was easy, we were

in Italy and we could get supplies and the help that we needed. Here I have nothing ; if I even had some yards of cotton I could get our military tailors to make some little garments. I have never imagined such misery and poverty as I have seen in Adowa. I must do something."

I asked, rather foolishly, if it would not be possible to get one of the religious orders to undertake the work.

"No," answered the General at once. "If we did that we should immediately arouse the suspicion and hostility of the Coptic priests ; they would think we were trying to proselytize. It must be done by private enterprise."

When I was told that there would be a seat for me in a car going to Asmara, I asked General Villa Santa if there was anything that I could do for him, imagining that he might have some small shopping commissions. "Yes," came the reply, "try to find out if there are any Italian ladies in Asmara who would help about the children."

Sometimes the talk would turn to our mutual friends in Florence, to books or music, just the ordinary pleasant conversation at any dinner-table, and one would forget the whitewashed walls, the earth floor, and the uniforms of the men. But a sudden phrase, a chance word, and the man beside me would change from the simple friendly companion whose chief interest seemed to be caring for neglected children ; a flash of the eye, the set of the jaw, a few decisive words, and he was the General of a famous fighting division on active service.

The last night at mess I found that the General was proposing my health ; if the honour was great for me, I felt that the "honour" really remained with my host and his staff, who knew that at that moment the British Government



was moving that sanctions should be enforced against Italy. I had tried again and again to explain why my country had felt it to be its duty to act in this way, but the logical Italian mind found it hard to follow the arguments I put forward. Yet because I was their guest I was never for one moment allowed to feel that though I was English I was therefore unwelcome. International relations were not to affect personal friendship; but I wondered again, as I had wondered in the *Biancamano*, if there were any other nation in the world at once so civilized and so chivalrous.

The next morning when I was saying good-bye to General Villa Santa he asked me: "Will you try to make people understand what we are doing here? You have seen it for yourself. The English talk about freedom—we have liberated the slaves, and what did freedom mean to the rest of the population? Freedom to live and die like animals; to suffer from every terrible disease; to see practically everything they possessed taken from them by the Negus and his representatives; freedom to murder a man and pay a few thalers to escape any punishment; to be denied justice unless they were rich enough to bribe the chief. You know that we have been welcomed as liberators by all except the personal followers of a few chiefs who shared in their masters' looting. You have heard the people asking that we should advance farther and farther into the Tigrai to bring peace and security. Who can believe that this people is capable of doing anything for themselves? What have they done in the last thousand years? You have seen the misery in which they live; they must have the help of a civilized nation if conditions are ever to be improved. Just write what you have seen for yourself, that is all that I ask."

I thought of the temporary Infirmary in Adowa and the

happiness on the mother's face as she saw her baby being cared for ; of the joy of the liberated slaves ; of the pleas of the small chiefs for protection and justice ; of the welcome given by the poor people to the Italian Army.

"Those are the things that I have tried to describe," I told General Villa Santa.

## CHAPTER IX

### ON THE ROAD TO MAKALE

Two officers of the Gavinana Division were in the car with me on my return journey to Asmara, so with the General's account of the advance, his map and their explanations, I was able to follow the exact route taken by the Division and to marvel anew at their feat of endurance. We had plenty of time to study the terrain, for at the top of the first descent we were told that there was a convoy coming up and that we must wait, which we did for two hours while a column of about a hundred lorries struggled up the hill. This was the only bit of the military road over the mountains which was still in use. During the week that I had been in Adowa a fine new road had been made through the valleys, but I was glad that on my way up I had followed the line of the mule-track.

Once the last of the column had struggled up, we swept along in fine style, lunched with some of the officers of the Division at Mai Enda Baria, and were in Asmara by 6 p.m. Distance at this time was always reckoned by hours and not by kilometres. If one asked how far a place was away the reply was : "So many hours if you are not held up" ; while if one was 'up behind an advance one had also to calculate the capacity of one's car to climb rocks and ford rivers. Adowa to Asmara in nine hours, with three hours' waits by the way, showed the improvement in the road, for we had taken ten hours on the outward journey.

My stay in Asmara was brief, for a new advance was to

take place and the journalists were being divided up into cohorts to go to the headquarters of the three Army Corps. I asked for a seat in a car going to Entisciò, the only one of the "prongs of the trident" which I had not seen. We followed the familiar road almost as far as Mai Aini, but turned off just short of that place and crossed the plain through which the Mareb flows. Here the distance between the two mountain ranges is far wider than on the road to Adowa, and we drove for mile after mile across the sandy expanse and through what might almost be dignified by the name of a wood. We climbed over some comparatively low hills, and after an eight hours' run came to where the headquarters of the native Army Corps had been, for on our arrival we found a deserted valley. Some men of the supply services were loading up a mule convoy and a single mess-tent stood on a little hill above, but we were a day behind the show. The troops had left almost twenty-four hours previously and were somewhere in the mountains on their way south.

The journalists were considerably nonplussed by this development, for they had seen themselves accompanying the advance. By some sixth sense I had realized before we left Asmara that we were too late, but I had kept my opinion to myself. What was left of the afternoon was spent by my companions in what I equally knew was a hopeless search for mules, every one of which had been earmarked for its special task days, if not weeks, ahead. Finally the journalists decided that the only thing to do was to await the return of a Divisional General who was coming back to dine in the mess-tent; they were confident that he would be able to help them. I did not think that even a General would be able to conjure mules out of the bare hillsides.

Close by I had seen a crowd of natives which had a

familiar aspect, and I discovered that one of my friends from the political office at Adowa had arrived. He told me that he had only reached Entisciò the evening before and had given no warning of his coming, but the mysterious native telegraph had been at work and that morning the crowd had begun to arrive. He was holding his court in the most patriarchal fashion in an arbour built of branches with a pile of stones for a table; the usual parties of priests and chiefs had come to make their acts of submission, there were also the usual suitors of all kinds with their long and involved requests to be disentangled, granted, or refused.

At last the cold drove me down to the mess-tent where the journalists sat. When the General arrived he brought neither comfort nor mules. He told the journalists that he had none for them, and the only thing that they could do was to go back to Asmara in the morning. In the course of dinner he told me that there was no news, the advance was going well, there was no enemy, but the country was awful. The mess had also clearly had orders not to talk, and my neighbour on my other side presented a bland ignorance on the subject of the light tanks, which amused me, for as a rule they and their achievements were favourite topics of conversation in the Army. On this occasion I felt as if I had mentioned a rather indelicate subject. The General gave orders that I was to sleep in a certain hut, and parted with me with the cheering words that he hoped it would not rain, as the roof leaked.

Indeed, the surprising news at Entisciò was that there had been heavy rain the previous night. Every authority declares that it *never* rains in East Africa between September and March, but we were to discover how wrong the authorities can be. The hut assigned to me was too theatrical to be

true. The walls were made of large brown stones, the interstices being stuffed with loose red earth, the roof of rough branches being covered with bits of the green and purple canvas of the Army tents. It was for all the world like the huts one sees in provincial productions of *Macbeth* or *Henry V*, and provided about as much protection from the weather. Torrents of rain began in a short time, and my night was diversified by trying to discover where the roof leaked least and by the curious sounds which I put down to the presence of some small animal. In the morning I found that they had been caused by the falls of earth and stones which were washed out of the walls.

Our return journey was incessantly delayed by the deep mud which had formed wherever there was a gulley, and the road appeared to consist of nothing else. We had many companions in misfortune, for the motor-lorries were finding the going almost impossible; wheels revolved madly but nothing happened, and it meant incessantly getting out and looking for branches and stones to try and give them some kind of hold. If a few hours' rain could reduce the country to such a state, one began to realize what the conditions must be in the spring and late summer, and how impossible any military operations would be after the beginning of the rainy season in May.

Our private troubles were increased by the difficulty of obtaining petrol (you do not find garages by the roadside in Eritrea, and all supplies must, of course, be obtained from the military authorities). Previously I had always been with either a member of the staff of the Press Bureau or else with Army officers who could commandeer petrol from any dump. Now it meant endless visits to authorities and filling up of forms, and a round of about another hundred miles to be sure of supplies. As a result, dusk found us at

Adi Caieh, instead, as we hoped, at Adigrat, whither we had decided to go in order to try to follow up the advance of the first Army Corps on Makale. We called on the Captain of the *Comando Tappa* at Adi Caieh, who kindly offered us dinner, and—what was almost more important at the moment—real bedrooms which did not let in the rain, for we arrived like the Demon King in the pantomime amid the flashes of lightning of a tropical thunderstorm.

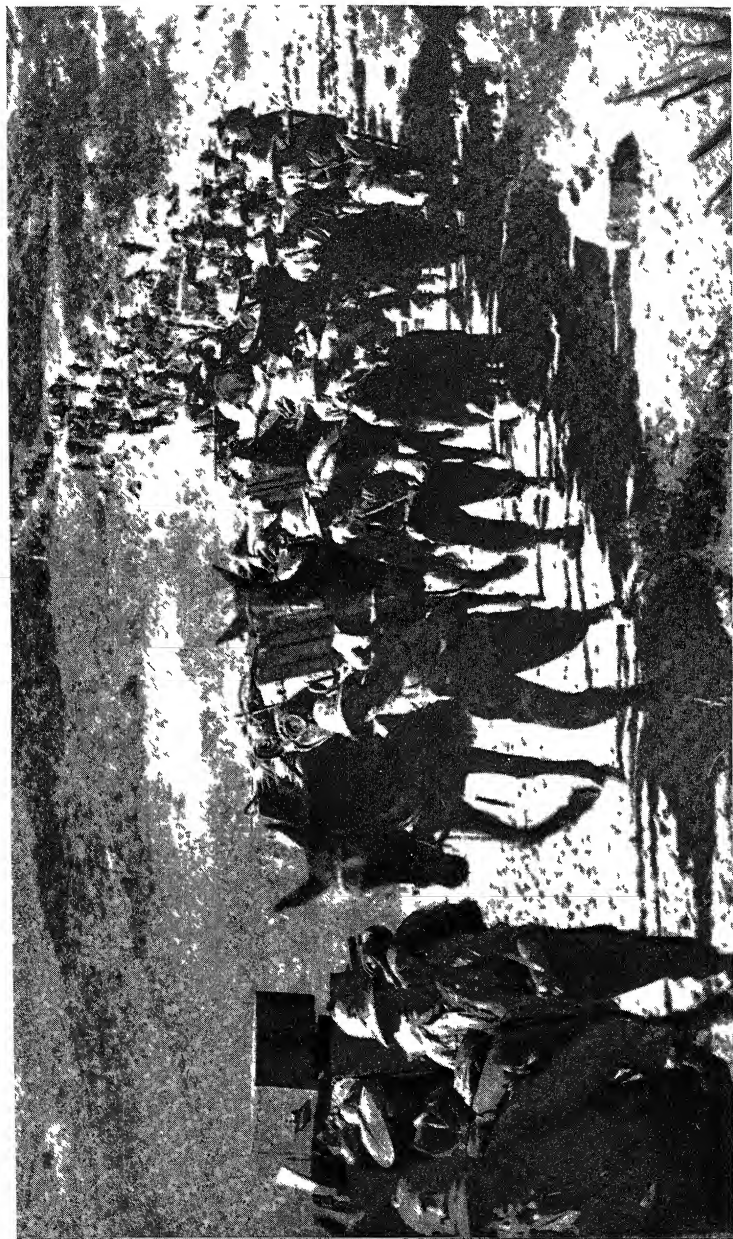
The next morning we found the road crammed with troops marching down to Adigrat. The going was, of course, immensely improved since I had been there three weeks previously, and the plain itself presented a very changed appearance. It was now covered with tents and buildings, and all the traffic of an Army Corps was winding across the partially made new roads. The Army Corps itself was far away on the road to Makale, but we were advised to wait until the next morning, as there had been a pause in the advance and we could easily catch up the Corps headquarters on the following day.

A journalists' mess had been established at Adigrat, which was also giving hospitality to passing officers in command of the motor supply columns, and most interesting company they proved to be. There was one word which resounded from end to end of Eritrea in the autumn and winter of 1935—it was used to describe the nature of the war—it was a *guerra logistica*. The word was not recognized by any dictionary, and though one knew from practical experiences and observation exactly what it meant, much thought failed to reveal any English equivalent short of a whole sentence of explanation. *Logistica*, when applied to the war, covered the organization of the port of Massawa, the discharging of cargoes, the increased traffic possibilities of the railway, but above all it meant the construction of



GENERAL PIRZIO BIROLI, COMMANDING THE NATIVE ARMY TROOPS





TAKING OVER THE FRONT LINE POSITIONS AT MAKALÉ

the roads and the work of the supply services. I had studied columns of figures, I had read endless articles dealing with the problem of providing for the needs of the Army of East Africa, which had to be maintained in a country destitute of all supplies. It was all very impressive on paper, but it was infinitely more impressive when one talked to the men who were actually doing the work.

So far I had only known the motor convoys as objects of terror and admiration—terror when one had to meet or pass them on the narrow roads in a blinding cloud of dust, with a rock wall on one side and a precipice on the other—admiration, for I knew from every mess of the work that they did, and I had experienced their unfailing kindness and help in any and every difficulty. The service seemed to be already producing its own type of officers; they were mostly big, broad-shouldered, and bearded.

"We look the most awful brigands, I know," laughed one of them, "but we never have time to shave and it is tidier in the end to grow a beard. Won't you please write something in your book about the lorry-drivers? So far they really are the heroes of this war. They are never off the roads; the only rest that they get is while their lorries are being filled up. They eat in any spare moments. They drive their great heavy machines day and night, doing, if they are lucky, twelve miles an hour; they are blinded and choked with dust and fumes. There is seldom more than a foot to spare between them and certain death, and sometimes there has not been that, for the casualties in the motor columns have been heavy."

The pride of officers and men was that they never failed the troops; the food, the ammunition, and, above all, the precious letters, arrived to time, whatever it cost in human effort and fatigue. "I never heard a word of complaint,"

said one officer, "not even when we had done about eighteen hours and thought that we were going to get a little rest, and the order came to load up again and start at once."

There were two officers in charge of every column, one of whom patrolled ceaselessly on a motor-cycle up and down a line of anything up to fifty lorries in order to keep them together and to help lame ducks. The general opinion at dinner seemed to be that the worst thing on the roads were large snakes ; all right if you were on a lorry, but horrid when you met them on a motor-bicycle, of which they were not in the least alarmed. One officer volunteered the information that he had not had his boots off for eleven days during the first advance, while another expressed the opinion which the man who is doing the work always holds about the staff: "I wish that some of them would come and do just a little of our job for once. I would like to take one of these men who order us about so light-heartedly and grumble if anything is half an hour late." (That was a libel on all staff officers whom I had met, who had been loud in their praise of the convoys.) "I'd give him, not fifty lorries to look after on a dark night, but, say, just about eight or ten by daylight, and that only for a few hours, then perhaps he'd know something."

"Look out for us on the roads when you pass a column, won't you, and please write something about our men."

They swung themselves to their feet, put on their great-coats and buckled on their revolvers ("useful against snakes"), and tramped away to pick up their columns. It had been lucky, they said, to find a mess. One of them could not remember when he had last had a hot meal ; they generally eat their rations cold and flavoured with dust. I thought it was not only the men of the motor

columns who served their country well in the Army of East Africa, the officers shared the work and the hardship, with the addition of heavy responsibility.

The next morning a Swiss journalist and I set off to overtake the Army Corps. After one climb out of the plain of Adigrat we came out on to a wide expanse of level country. Instead of savage peaks and mountains with long flat summits, there were low rolling hills, and we drove for miles across brown scorched grass dotted with low trees. It was exactly like the country that I had seen in films of Central Africa. Finally we climbed a steep hill, and amid the trees on its level summit we found a temporary headquarters of the First Army Corps. The advance guard was far ahead, and we decided to push on. The road now degenerated frankly into a mule-track, but our only mild adventure was sticking in a river from which we were rescued by the usual kind lorry-drivers. "The journalists are with the Blackshirt Division of the 28th of October," we were told. "It is breaking camp at 1 p.m. You will easily catch them up." We found some battalions of the Division, but no journalists; I began to feel that we were pursuing the Flying Dutchman.

We passed more and more troops on the march, and finally our career came to an end at the top of a ravine, where it was obvious that the car for the moment could go no farther. A small body of Engineers had just arrived and a Blackshirt Battalion was close on our heels. "We will make a road down in three hours," the officers assured me, so I suggested to my companion that we should go forward on foot and leave the car to follow. At the bottom of the gorge was a small plateau commanding a wide plain, and here was encamped a handful of native troops who were acting as scouts for the Army Corps. Three miles

farther on were Ras Gugsä and his men, who were returning to occupy Makale on behalf of the Italians.

We at last solved the mystery of the journalists. A few of the more enterprising had deserted the main party and made their way up to join the scouts. One of them provided me with a little mild amusement as he confided to me that he thought our position was dangerous. There was nobody but these few Ascari scouts, and what would happen if there were any kind of an attack by the enemy? No doubt, according to the laws of warfare, there was something to be said from his point of view, but there happened to be no enemy within an unknown number of miles, and I could not feel that we were really running any risks.

Suddenly the hillsides behind us were alive with men. The Blackshirt Division had arrived and had branched off east and west at the top of the gorge, but so perfect was the camouflage of their uniforms that it was only by watching closely that one detected their presence. The Engineers were as good as their word, and in the course of a couple of hours had turned the mule-track down the gorge into a passable road, and our car made a triumphal appearance followed by the detachment of light tanks. Tents were pitched on the hills above us, the men led the pack-mules down to water in the little river below, and fires began to glow in the evening light; the whole scene corresponded so closely to one's idea of an army encamped in a possibly hostile country as to appear fantastic and unreal. I felt that the fears of the journalist would be allayed by this display of military force.

A stroke of good fortune awaited me. The Colonel in command of the native troops had been in the *Biancamano*, and invited me to dinner. The Ascari and their officers pride themselves on travelling light, and many apologies

were made for the deficiencies of the mess, but my only feeling was one of gratitude for hospitality when even an extra person was a serious consideration. Seats were the first difficulty. At last boxes of one kind or another were found for us all, and fourteen people squeezed themselves round an improvised table meant to hold eight. Eating and drinking had to be carefully timed with one's neighbours, but the one tragedy of dinner was the wild goose which formed the *pièce de résistance*. It had been shot that afternoon, and one might as well have tried to eat a motor-tyre. Even here the kindness of my hosts did not fail, for they conjured two eggs out of the dessert and insisted on my eating them.

I have been at many picnics which were just as uncomfortable, and at which the cheerfulness and good-humour of the mess were lacking. The only person who was obviously cross and disgruntled was an officer who had just arrived to help with the making of cinema pictures. His first remark was a question as to how I put up with the intolerable discomforts of life with the Army. I felt considerably bewildered. It was true, as he pointed out, that one was alternately roasted and frozen, that one was always thirsty, sometimes hungry, generally dirty ; that (except in Asmara) one slept in draughty tents in a temperature below freezing ; that one sat for hours by the roadside waiting for motor convoys to pass ; that one bumped over mule-tracks and helped to push the car up hills ; but so great was the interest of the life, so varied and unforeseeable were the events of each day, that it had never struck me that I was anything but amazingly lucky to be following the fortunes of the Army and sharing its life.

It took me some time to assimilate the idea that this officer regarded me as a person to be pitied. When I tried to explain my point of view he abandoned all further

attempts at conversation with a person so obviously mad. He was the first Italian whom I had heard utter a word of complaint about the conditions under which the Army lived, and I thought it was what is called in Ireland "black ingratitude", for he too was a guest. His excuse probably was that he had come practically straight from Italy up to the advance post, instead of being broken in by a period on the lines of communication.

That night I slept in the car, which was certainly warmer than a tent, and in the cold dawn the advance began again. We were only thirty miles from Makele and I longed to follow up as the road became possible, but my companion insisted that he must return to Asmara. It seemed to me very strange that having got so far he should not wish to go on. So back we went to Adigrat by a road which was already much better than the mule-track over which we had come the day before. There was a long delay on one hill owing first to a convoy, and secondly to engine trouble of our own, and I found some of my friends of the *Biancamano* who were guarding the top of the pass. Of course they were longing for news of the advance, and very happy to hear that the Blackshirt Division was leading it. "But," they asked, "where is the enemy? We came here to fight in a war and there is never any enemy." Their disgust was almost pathetic, and I felt that they would have thought me a contemptible creature could they have known how thankful I was that there had been practically no fighting and consequently so few casualties.

Back at Adigrat, I decided to stay there. It was useless to drive the ten hours back to Asmara when my objective was still Makale, so I settled down in the deserted mess to wait patiently for the chance of a seat in a car.

Across the plain the native "town" looked less squalid

and miserable than Adowa or Axum, but one short visit soon dispelled the illusion. Adigrat, in the matter of filth, smells, and flies, was well able to hold its own with either of the others. The one picturesque sight was a group of priests seated in a large semicircle on a grass enclosure outside the church. Two men were on their feet in the centre making the most impassioned speeches in turn. An Italian officer who was also looking on, and spoke some Tigrine, asked a native what was happening. The latter explained that it was a dispute between some priests. The whole scene suggested the Old Testament, the impassioned gestures of the orators, with their turbans and their flowing white draperies, as they strode up and down within the circle appealing to their supporters.

Walks in the wide valley and on the low surrounding hills showed me how mistaken was my first idea of the emptiness of the countryside ; native huts were hidden away in every fold of the ground and in every little cluster of trees. There were ricks of corn, and I saw the oxen treading it out on bare earthen threshing-floors, while the women with large straw fans were winnowing it—again a scene which might have come out of the Old Testament.

Among the trees on the bluff above headquarters was the spring from which water was provided, and here I met a native woman who spoke quite good Italian. She told me that she had been in service with the family of the Commissioner of Asmara for nearly six years ; she was now married and had two small children. I wondered what effect six years of living in cleanliness and comfort had had upon her ; so far as I could see she differed in no way from the other women, having relapsed happily into her natural dirt, and she assured me that she was very happy.

She took me to see the little church which had been



built by a French Mission, and we paid a visit to the Sisters who belonged to the Mission. They cared for several sick and old people in some dark and dirty native huts. Their only food was roughly ground corn, which was mixed with water and then baked on a flat iron plate. It was a spongy and tasteless substance, not to be compared with the bread made by the Ascari with the hot stone in the centre.

I was sorry that both the priests were out, for I should have liked to hear their views on the possibilities of educating their converts to some more civilized forms of life. It is a problem to which the officers in the native regiments are very much alive. They say that their soldier servants, who are taught all the customs of Europeans, relapse immediately they are away from the tents and the messes : "How can you raise the standard of life among a people who desire nothing but a handful of flour to eat and a filthy earthen floor on which to sleep?"

One afternoon I was taken to see the market, which is one of the largest in this part of the Tigrai. Here again there was nothing for sale except a little corn, coffee, and a few chillis. Cattle, chickens, and eggs had long since been bought up by the Army at enormous prices, but there were thousands of natives who had apparently come for "the fun of the fair".

Accompanied by the official cinematograph operator, we went on to take a film of the local chief or "mayor" of Adigrat. His *Ghebi* (or palace) stood within the great grass courtyard where I had seen the priests disputing a few days previously. There was an inner courtyard crowded with men who were attending a law court. The two disputants were in the centre, but it was impossible to distinguish the judge or judges, as everyone seemed to be taking part in the proceedings. We climbed up some broken stone stairs to the

"front door", which was on the first floor, and were received at the top by an elderly and comparatively clean native.

I was much interested, as for the first time I was going to see how the comparatively "well-to-do" lived. The "palace" consisted of three small rooms ; the windows, which had wooden shutters but no glass, had a faint suggestion of the Arab style of architecture. There was hay on the floor, and in one room there was a very low couch of leather stretched on four legs and covered with a hideous European rug. There was absolutely nothing else of any kind except a rifle and a small round shield of hide.

The Chief, after a little conversation, was invited to come out into the courtyard in order that a film might be made of him. The day before he had seen a cinematograph performance for the first time, and was apparently very pleased to figure as a "star". The law case was immediately abandoned in favour of being filmed, and no crowd was ever more willing and enthusiastic. To my amusement I found myself providing the only "female interest" in apparently animated conversation with the Chief.

When this was over we were invited into the "palace" again, and my heart sank when I realized that the moment had come for "refreshments". One of the servants opened a trap-door in the floor and produced three less than dubiously clean glasses, which were filled to the brim with the native spirit called "tetch". It is made of honey and water and fermented with the leaves of some tree. I tried to conceal my horror when the tumbler was handed to me. I wondered if etiquette demanded that I should drink it all, even one sip was a real sacrifice to the cause of Italy

in the Tigrai. The spirit was indescribably nasty, and I speculated as to whether it contained more typhoid or cholera germs. The Chief also had his horn drinking vessel filled to the brim, and I saw with relief that the correct procedure was to drink a small portion and then hand the remainder to one of the servants.

After a little polite conversation and a promise that the Chief should see the film which had been made, we retired to a mess where, it must be confessed, we tried to stave off the results of the "tetch" with black coffee and cherry brandy, remedies which proved efficacious, as none of us died.

The days passed by, and every evening I was assured that there would be a car going up to Makale "in the morning". One afternoon I actually started, but the car broke down on the first hill and we had to return ignominiously. Adigrat provided all the possible discomforts with none of the alleviations of life "up the line". General Headquarters always seemed to me to live in a backwater. There was no news to be had except that the troops had entered Makale without any resistance and were occupying a strategic line on the heights south of that town. Wireless bulletins were unobtainable, and we knew nothing of what was happening except that the Native Army Corps had made a splendid march over the mountains and were also in Makale, while the 2nd Army Corps was standing fast at Adowa.

One morning I decided to walk to the top of the hill above headquarters. The keen air tempered the heat of the sun, and I did not realize how high I had climbed until I found myself looking down on an aeroplane which was flying up and down the valley below me. The hill, which in any other country would, I suppose, be dignified

by the name of a mountain, had a wide, level summit, and from this I could command a fertile plateau, its bastion of cliff, and another great valley beyond. The cliffs which surrounded the mountain-top had many look-out posts which were now abandoned, as the front was south of Makale. But I was suddenly held up by some Ascari.

"Will you please immediately return to camp ; we have strict orders not to allow anyone to come up here for fear that they may be shot by the natives."

I was more surprised than alarmed ; indeed at the moment I imagined that the Ascari were repeating orders which they had received during the first days of the occupation of Adigrat. I had become so accustomed to wandering about, either alone or with Italian officers, without the slightest thought of danger, that I incessantly forgot that I was with an army on active service in a possibly hostile country.

The next day I heard that there had been a certain amount of skirmishing, and, as one officer explained to me, "We have got to do some clearing out of the region behind the new lines, it all needs tidying up." I, however, saw nothing more alarming on my way back to camp than a native stalking along, followed by his wife, who was staggering under a large bundle of wood.

At last came the longed-for news that there was a seat for me in a car going to Makale the next morning ; three hours later I was told that the car had been commandeered by a certain personage and that I could not go. There was nothing to be done but to go back to Asmara in order to try and find some means of transport. The difficulties were being increased as the lines of communication became longer and longer ; it was now virtually two

days' drive from Asmara to the front line, but that town remained the headquarters of the Press Bureau and the only centre for telegrams and letters to Europe. Journalists endured agonies of indecision as to whether they should stay there in order to be able to send daily despatches to their papers, or go up to the various Army Corps headquarters and be out of touch with the world for days at a time.

## CHAPTER X

### AT MAKALE WITH THE NATIVE ARMY CORPS

THE days that followed at Asmara gave me an insight into what must be the feelings of prisoners, but the town did not give a good imitation of a modern gaol, for we were suddenly deprived of electric light and, for one day, of water. As the sun set by 5.30 p.m. and darkness fell immediately, one groped about one's room by the light of one precious candle, or went to the Press Bureau where journalists with clacking typewriters gathered round a hurricane lamp like enormous and noisy moths. Punctually once a day we were told of the doings of the flying columns of the Native Army Corps, which were engaged in routing out the nests of enemy troops from pockets in the mountains. The Air Force bombed some larger concentrations, and the elusive and ubiquitous Ras Seyum was reported to be at places at least a hundred miles apart. One pilot enlivened the news by declaring that he had seen that Chief falling off his horse; the officer in question refused to explain how he had identified the Ras (whom he had never seen) from a height of several hundred feet.

The news that Marshal Badoglio had been appointed to succeed General de Bono as Commander-in-Chief and High Commissioner in East Africa brought about an outbreak of strategy in the Press Bureau. It was decided that the advent of the Chief of the Italian General Staff

presaged a change of method in the conduct of the campaign, that the pace of the advance would be immediately increased; journalists began to fling Army Corps across the map with but slight attention to such mundane problems as the nature of the terrain and the need for roads. Each had his pet sector of the front from which the advance would certainly be made, and marched the Italian forces down to Addis Ababa with an ease and rapidity which the Marshal might well have envied. I listened with the meekness becoming a woman, but I thought all the time of the steep and stony mountain-sides; of the Engineers with their pickaxes and spades labouring twelve hours a day to turn mule-tracks into roads; of the long line of motor-lorries creeping up from Massawa; of the strain on men and machines. Already it was nearly 400 miles from the port to the front line, and not all the fire and energy of Marshal Badoglio could shorten his lines of communication.

This aspect of the problem was forced on my attention every day and all day by my own experiences, for it was lack of transport which held me a prisoner; practically every car belonging to the Press Bureau was in dock, and I could find no way of leaving Asmara. Journalists could send telegrams to their papers giving the daily bulletins, but I wanted to be up in the front line seeing men and things for myself; the name of Makale was rapidly becoming written on my heart.

At last a car made its longed-for appearance, but owing to various delays on the road, and particularly the large number of troops on the march, we made but slow progress, and when I finally arrived at Adigrat it was too late to hope to reach Makale that night. I put up at the familiar journalists' mess and I was told that no

journalists had been there for over a week, but this lack of custom was to be immediately remedied. At 10.30 p.m. a party arrived frantically demanding food and beds. I imagined that they had seen neither for weeks, but my sympathy rather evaporated when I found that they had been living in great comfort at Makale and had eaten a large luncheon before leaving.

The "emigrants' waiting-room" showed signs of being uncomfortably crowded, so I set up my bed in the mess-room and waited the departure of the "starving party" in order to go to sleep. At 11.30 p.m. they finally left, and except for the usual camp noises, peace reigned until 1 a.m., when another journalist arrived. By this time the mess waiter had long since departed to his tent, so I could only assure the new-comer that there was nothing to eat. He retired to the tent, and I addressed myself once more to slumber. At 2 a.m. the door burst open again and two more journalists arrived. They did not like the crowd in the tent, so decided to camp in the mess-room, a process which seemed to take at least an hour. It was a night which was more amusing in retrospect than at the time.

I made an effort to be away by 6 a.m. as the art of travel in the occupied zone was to be off before the motor supply columns began to move, which was generally at 6.30 a.m. The soldier-chauffeur, however, did not approve of early rising, and it was 8 a.m. before he was ready to start. This meant that the road was crowded for miles, and very often we had to crawl along in a cloud of dust at ten miles an hour. However, I had the interest of comparing the mule-track over which I had driven two weeks previously with the new military road. Where there had been a descent so precipitous that it became



famous—or notorious!—throughout the Army, there was now an entirely new stretch of about a mile cut out of the solid rock round the side of the hill. It could, however, only carry “one-way traffic”, and we were stopped at the top as there were cars coming up.

The non-commissioned officer in charge of the Carabinieri post came to entertain me during the wait. As soon as he found out that I was English he began to discuss the political situation. “Won’t you tell the English, please, that we are kind to the natives here, that we are good friends with them; even here we have got a little dressing-station for them and they come to our doctors all the time.”

It was strange to hear from this shrewd non-commissioned officer the same plea for understanding by England of Italy’s action in the Tigrai which I had heard from General Villa Santa. Great as was the difference in intellectual capacity and in rank between the two men, there was the same longing for what they believed to be a just appreciation of the situation, and once again I promised that I would try to explain.

The last car reached the summit, and we and the champing motor column behind us were waved on our way. Farther on I found that the deep gulleys where we had so often stuck had been filled up, but in some places where the road had suffered severely from the heavy traffic it was less good than the mule-track. I hardly recognized the narrow gorge and the little plateau where I had spent the night of November 6 with the scouts; there was now a good road and a supply depot at the bottom. We crossed a wide plain and started to climb over the ridges of hills which separated us from Makale. The country once again became intolerably monotonous

with arid yellow soil, scrub, and stones. Troops on the march, mule-trains, camels, lorries all impeded our way, and climbing up the last pass the car stuck. As usual, one got out and put stones under the back wheels, and, as usual, kind helpers appeared to push it to the top.

It was now far too late to think of getting to Makale in time for lunch, so I got out to eat some food under the only tree I had seen for about twenty miles. Just as I had finished a small car stopped and an officer got out.

"Is there anything the matter? Can I help you in any way? I had the pleasure of meeting you two weeks ago at the mess of the Scouts with Colonel Tosti."

I explained that it was only a pause for luncheon, so the officer stayed to tell me all the news of the road and of the two Army Corps which were at Makale. "There are some enemy troops just over there," he said, pointing to some nearby hills, "and we are busy trying to hunt them out, but it is very difficult country."

It was a curious sensation to be sitting gossiping pleasantly by the roadside and to be told that on the hill which seemed so close "there were enemy troops", but I knew of the existence of such groups in the countryside, and as they had never yet attacked the road, why should they do so now? Indeed, the whole way up I had been marvelling at the want of dash and initiative of the Abyssinian forces. Why had they never raided the lines of communication? My lack of interest in their presence at the moment arose, not from bravery but from contempt. There was only one refrain among the officers who had been in Lybia: "If we were fighting the Arabs here it would be a very different affair; they used to try to raid our camps every night."

My friend was now in command of the back area.

"Remember," he said in parting, "if there is anything that I can do for you, you have only to tell me; perhaps I might be useful." He was typical of the kindness and helpfulness of all ranks of the Italian Army, from Generals who took endless trouble on my behalf, to privates who pushed my car up hills. He was typical also of the comradeship which existed on the road; even a car full of staff officers submitted with good humour when I held them up to ask the way, for one of the difficulties was to find the exact place or person for whom one was looking. The natural answer to any inquiry was: "I am a stranger here myself." (The reply one always gets in London when one asks the way.) And one's only hope were the Carabinieri, who controlled the road traffic. Even they were not infallible, for if the place was beyond their zone they had never heard of it, while a General would move his headquarters and the news would travel slowly down the road.

My objective at the moment was the headquarters of the Native Army Corps, which I had been told at Asmara was at Dolò, a few miles from Makale, as the road to that place was not yet open. I had heard rumours, however, that the H.Q. had moved, and persistent inquiries revealed the fact that they were now near the new flying-ground, which had been made some three miles from Makale. We drove across a high plateau to what I recognized as a typical *ghebi*; there was a high, rough stone wall, above which waved the tops of some eucalyptus trees, and a two-storied building in a far corner. Within the wall was a wide grassy space on which were pitched a number of tents. I inquired nervously for the famous General Pirzio Biroli, of whom I had heard so much; he was reputed to be very kind, but I must confess that

I did not lightly beard Generals in command of Army Corps. I imagined that at the most he would receive me for a few minutes, say a few civil words, and then hand me over to a junior officer and leave me to my fate.

In a very short time his chief-of-staff entered the mess-tent where I was waiting, to tell me that the General was engaged but would come immediately, and a few minutes later a tall figure strode into the tent. General Pirzio Biroli stands over six feet, with great, broad shoulders; the small, well-shaped head is covered with dark hair brushed smoothly back, the eyes are dark and bright, the nose is short and straight, and the mouth at once firm and kindly. I was to learn later that he was a famous shot, fencer, and horseman. Here was a man who was a born soldier, and who in any age would have been a leader in the field; he would have worn the armour of a Crusader as if it weighed no more than his present khaki tunic, and would have wielded a battle-axe as heavy as that of Richard Cœur-de-Lion himself. Indeed, it was easy to picture Pirzio Biroli in the armour or uniform of any of the armies which have made the history of Italy, or of Europe, and always leading the van.

It was typical of the man that by other people's calculations his watch was always fast, and I very rapidly learnt that if the General said he was starting at 8 a.m. it was as well to be ready at 7.45, and even then one would find him mounted and waiting. It was but natural that his Army Corps was famous for its rapidity of movement; I could not imagine anyone who had to do with Pirzio Biroli being anything else.

To return, however, to my first meeting with him. I tried to gather my rather scattered wits to listen to his very friendly welcome. "You have arrived," he said,

"at a very interesting moment. The Native Army Corps are to hand over the front line positions, which we occupied after the taking of Makale, to the 1st Army Corps. Tomorrow morning I will lend you one of my mules and send you up to the most advanced position, and you will be able to see the troops actually on the move. The Native Corps is going to the Tembien to drive out the enemy troops who are still in that district."

I at once conceived a most ambitious plan, but waited for a propitious moment to propound it.

That night at dinner the General returned to the question of my plans. His mule and a staff officer would be ready to accompany me at 8 a.m. to the advanced positions. Had I yet seen Makale? No, then I could see that in the afternoon. "You know," he said, "that I am leaving here myself tomorrow afternoon and going to Makale for a day or two before starting for the Tembien."

I had a moment when I saw myself saying good-bye to him after luncheon the next day and returning to Asmara. The time had obviously arrived to nerve myself to propound my plan and to make my request. Could he, and would he, take me with him on this expedition? I was not supported by the courage of ignorance; I knew only too well the difficulties I was creating. The Native Army Corps prided itself on travelling light, and even one extra person (particularly a useless one like myself) was a serious consideration. In addition, I had only met the General that afternoon for the first time, and had absolutely no claim on his kindness. I had only one very doubtful asset. A special correspondent of an English paper had bought a mule during the advance on Makale, and on his return to Asmara had left this animal with General Montagna who commanded a Division of the 1st Army Corps. When

I was coming to Makale the correspondent had most kindly said that I could borrow it. Mules were practically unobtainable at the moment, so I coupled my request with an explanation of the situation.

To my lasting gratitude, and, it must be confessed, to my great surprise, the General immediately said that I should go with him. "Send a radiogram immediately after dinner to General Montagna and ask him to have the mule at Makale by tomorrow evening," he told a staff officer. But here a difficulty arose. Where, in the game of general post which was being played by the 1st Army Corps and the Native Army Corps, was General Montagna, to be found? "Send the radiogram to the last place he was heard of," ordered the General. I felt it was rather a forlorn hope. Even if the wire reached General Montagna, was it not probable, considering the shortage of mules, that someone had annexed it in a moment of stress? However, it was not for me to suggest such a thing, and I hugged my permission to myself and went to bed a happy woman.

The next morning I had my first lesson in General Pirzio Biroli's methods. I strolled out at about 7.55 to look for my mule, to find the General himself waiting for me; the staff officer, who had not set his watch by the General's, did not appear for ten minutes, but on production of what he meekly assured the General was the right time according to the radio bulletin of the night before, was immediately forgiven.

Our way to the front line took us first across the plain, and then we climbed the range of hills which protects Makale to the south. Arrived at the highest point, where a native battery was still established, we looked across a wide irregular valley hundreds of feet below us, and away to

another line of mountains dominated by the peak of Amba Alaji ; below it was the pass where Toselli made his great stand in December 1895. To right and left along the ridge on which we stood were other batteries commanding the valley, while just below the crest behind us were the native regiments, now busy striking camp. When we turned and looked north we could see to our left the rolling hills of Tembien (where we were shortly to go), and on the horizon another line of mountains which I knew must be near the Tacazzè. The whole landscape was brown and yellow, with here and there a patch of vivid green corn, while the mountains were a deep blue in the early morning light. I felt again the endless monotony of this part of Abyssinia, without a tree, without a river, without a gleam of water to soften its stony harshness.

Back again in the *ghebi* I found the General talking to an old Ascari to whom he had promised the present of a revolver. To make sure that it was in good working order a board was attached to one of the trees, and at what seemed to me an impossible distance the General proceeded to test the weapon. His first "ranging" shot hit the tree just beside the board. He then proceeded to put the other five into a six-inch circle. Not a man with whom I should choose to fight a duel !

Except for the mess-tent everything had disappeared, and after luncheon the General said : "I shall see you this evening at dinner in our new quarters at Makale. We finished the road yesterday, so you can motor down in comfort." And, piling the luggage and several staff officers into the car, we proceeded to do so.

The town had so far been hidden from me by the configuration of the ground ; it now revealed itself to be far larger than any other which I had seen. It straggled

across the plain and over some mounds; it even boasted some European buildings. Above it to the east was a line of steep hills, the highest being crowned with the little round fort where Galliano and his battalion had held out for seven weeks in December 1895 and January 1896. The new headquarters of the Native Army Corps were established in and around a modern building, and, having dumped my luggage in the care of some Carabinieri, I went off to see something of the town. The enormous market-place was dominated by an amazing edifice which had once been the palace of the famous King Johannis. Above the usual grey-brown stone walls of the various courtyards rose four towers at each angle of the flat roof, towers and roof being outlined with Guelph battlements, while the rest of the building suggested that the architect had heard of the Alhambra. The ground floor consisted of two large rooms with the usual earthen floor, while in one of the two rooms above was the throne of King Johannis. This consisted of a wide flight of dark-brown wooden steps with balustrades leading up to a small platform covered with a canopy, but the actual throne itself had long since disappeared. Ras Seyum's men were reported to have looted anything that there had been in the palace before they evacuated the town, but judging by the complete emptiness of all Abyssinian "palaces", I should not imagine they got anything, except possibly a rug or two.

From the flat roof one looked out over the whole of the Makale plain, and on every mule-track there were columns winding along like slow brown snakes, troops marching up to the front line. The courtyards were filled with the followers of Ras Gugsa, and on the top of one of the excrescences of the palace two of them were playing with a machine-gun which was trained on the market-place. I



hoped that they would not let it off out of lightness of heart, just to make sure it was working all right.

The market-place at the moment was crammed with natives selling the usual small quantities of corn, coffee, and red pepper. There were a few cattle and still fewer mules, whose owners, the Italian officers reported, would have given points and a beating to any horse-coper. There was also a battalion of the Sila Division who had halted for a rest; they stood about or went off to inspect the palace, entirely undaunted by the fact that they had been averaging twenty-five miles a day for the four hundred miles from Massawa under the burning sun, and had been frozen in their tents at night in the cold of the Eritrean highlands.

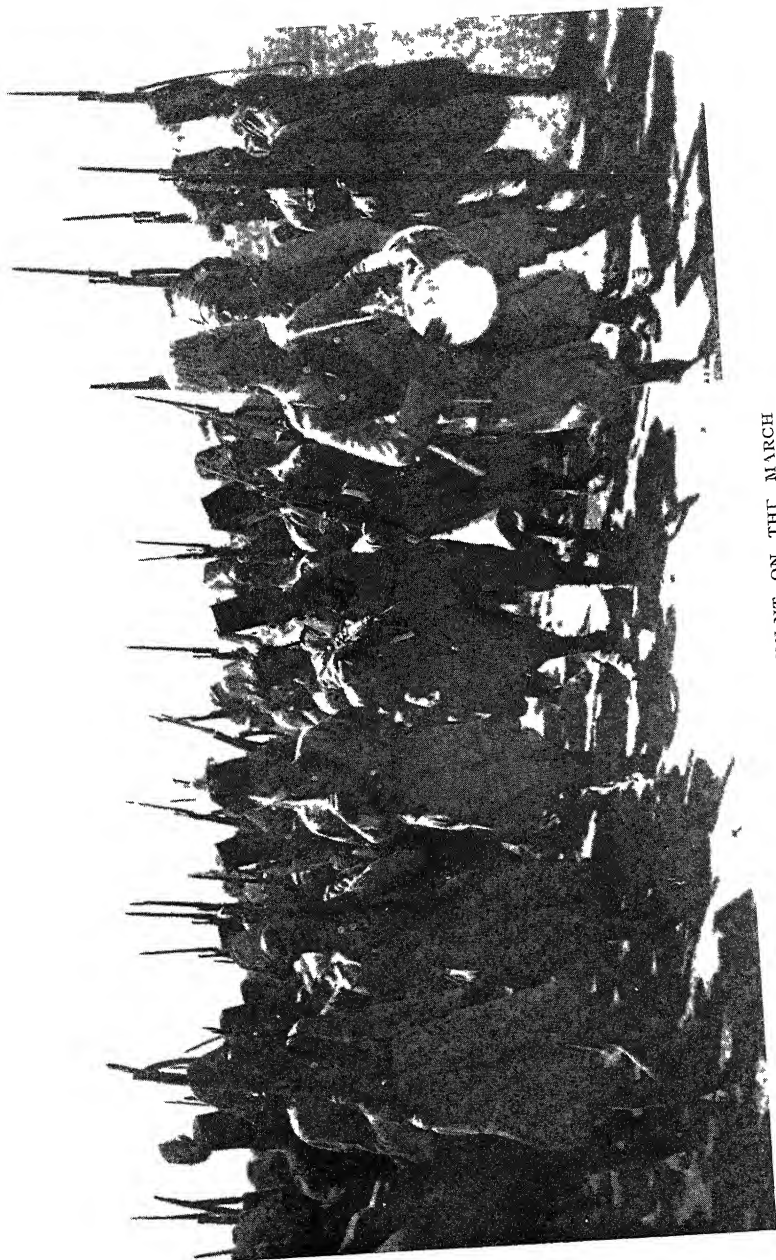
I returned to find that my tent had been erected in a small compound, and that my friend on the staff was engaged in trying to make it so secure that it would not be blown away in the night. The climate of Makale, if less cold than that of Adigrat and Adowa, had another detestable peculiarity: a wind got up every day at 11 a.m. and by evening had risen to gale force. The sides of my tent flapped madly, and every night I went to sleep firmly convinced that it would be blown to ribbons.

There was no reply from General Montagna about the mule, and I felt that my worst fears were being realized, when I suddenly heard voices outside my tent announcing its arrival. At dinner the General said that he had already seen it and that it was "a nice little beast"; inspected by daylight it proved to be exactly the twin of his.

I had told the General the day before that I was very anxious to see the Fortino Galliano, and he now asked me if I would care to ride up with him the next morning. If I would "care"! To be invited by a General of an Army Corps on active service to accompany him to see one of



OUR NATIVE CAVALRY ESCORT IN THE TEMBIEN



AN ASCARI REGIMENT ON THE MARCH

the historic sites of the war of 1895, which was also one of the present defences of Makale ! It was difficult to prevent my reply from sounding foolishly enthusiastic.

General Pirzio Biroli had brought his charger with him from Italy, a splendid weight-carrying hunter and the apple of his owner's eye. It had learnt to negotiate the stony mountain-sides of East Africa, stepping wisely and delicately, but I must confess I held my breath once or twice when I saw it feeling for a foothold on the razor edges of some rocks on our way to the fort. When mounted, the General towered not only over the Ascari but also over the Italian officers on their mules, and one of his staff confided to me that they were always terrified about his safety during an advance. "He will ride ahead, and of course you can see him for miles across this country ; he is a mark for any and every enemy."

The General had told me to be ready at 8 a.m., but at 7.45 I found him mounted and waiting ! The ride presented a very serious problem in correct behaviour. We were accompanied by an escort of Ascari Lancers, and the countryside was alive with detachments of native troops on the march, who halted and presented arms on the General's approach. He would stop to speak to the officer or non-commissioned officer in command, inquiring as to the condition of the men—if they were getting their rations regularly—and then send them on their way with some friendly words of encouragement.

My difficulty was to know how to dispose of myself on these occasions. I had started by jogging along at some distance in the General's rear, which I regarded as a suitable position, but I found that it entirely prevented me from hearing anything that he was saying to me. If I rode beside him I suddenly found myself facing a company of saluting

troops, which I felt was most unsuitable. Fortunately we soon abandoned the plain and started to climb the steep hillside up to the Fortino Galliano. The summit was connected to the next hill by a small saddle ; on two sides the ground fell sheer away, while on the fourth it sloped down more gently. Below the saddle was the deep gorge in which was the spring on which the fort was dependent for water. I watched the soldiers climbing down to fill their bottles, and I thought of what it must have meant during the siege when the enemy commanded its sides and were able to pick off Galliano's men at their leisure.

The little plateau had been surrounded by a wall, but most of this had disappeared. We dismounted at the foot of a steep path which led to the tiny fort itself, and the General handed me over to the officer in command of the battery of artillery which was in occupation. He told me that when he had arrived he had found little except a heap of stones, but the original outlines had been quite clear. The outer wall was practically complete again ; on the very summit of the hill there was a narrow platform, and behind it the ruins of what had once been a very small Coptic church. One could still trace the bases of the outer and inner walls. Here Galliano himself had lived. Strong as the position was, it was difficult to imagine how one battalion could have held it for seven weeks against Menelik's enormous army, to be forced to evacuate it in the end only by sickness and lack of water.

The General had to hurry back to headquarters, leaving a staff officer to escort me. A saddle had not been found to fit my mule by the time we started, so I was still riding the General's, and for the first time I discovered that those animals possess other qualities than obstinacy and endurance. On our way up the mule had jogged along to keep up with

the tremendous stride of the General's charger, had only shied in a mild way at motor-lorries, and had given himself all the airs of one who habitually moves in the best society. On the way down he relapsed into a state of complete boredom, crawled along like a snail, and shied at every stone above a certain size. He was, in fact, a complete snob.

In the afternoon I went to call on Conte della Porta, the head of the political bureau, as I was anxious to hear his views on the situation in Makale and the surrounding district. I found him established in one of the outhouses of a *ghebi*—no one ever camped inside a *ghebi* itself, the building was always dark and filthy. He told me that as Ras Gugsa had returned to his own town and province, most of the local chiefs and priests had made their submission to the Italian Government through him. As a result, Conte della Porta had not had the procession which had arrived at the political office at Adowa. On the other hand, I gathered that the work had been more strictly *political* in that it had consisted in getting in touch with waverers outside the occupied area, and so preparing the way for a further advance. The quarrels and jealousies of the chiefs had to be carefully studied and taken into account.

The situation was as usual dominated by the figures of Ras Cassa and Ras Seyum. I began to feel that the latter was rapidly developing into a first-class bore; he would neither fight nor surrender, nor do anything but dance like a will-o'-the-wisp through official bulletins. It was generally accepted that he and Ras Cassa were, like most of the Abyssinian chiefs, on the worst of terms, the situation being further complicated by the fact that Ras Cassa's wife had first been married to Ras Seyum. Considering the position occupied by women in Abyssinia, I felt that the Italians

were inclined to attach too much importance to the domestic side of the affair.

The political office was very busy dealing with the claims for damage done by the troops during the advance ; in this they had the help of a commission of local notables who knew the country and the people. It was a long and tiresome job, as every man put the most extravagant prices on hens that had disappeared (whether they had gone into an Italian pot or not), while the acres of corn that were supposed to have been trampled down would have equalled the whole territory of Abyssinia. Only after endless inquiries was it possible to decide what should be paid.

I returned, of course, to the perennially interesting question of slavery. Conte della Porta confirmed what I had already heard about the position of the domestic slaves. "They are in most cases treated as humble members of the family and are content to stay with their former owners ; they have naturally the slave mentality, and look to their masters for food, clothing, and shelter ; they are incapable of leading independent lives. At the same time they quite understand their new status, and if they are not treated well they threaten to leave. As their owners are too proud and too helpless to do anything for themselves it is in their interest to treat their slaves well. At the same time the slaves know that they cannot now be sold like cattle, and families broken up never to see each other again."

What, I asked, was the attitude of the chiefs to the freeing of the slaves, who after all represented a considerable portion of their wealth ? Did it militate against the popularity of Italian occupation ?

"In certain cases, yes," said Conte della Porta frankly, "but we just had to accept that fact. It is impossible for us to allow slavery to exist under our flag."

The political office had already organized free medical treatment for the natives under the charge of a civilian doctor, who was trying to deal with 200 patients a day. The Ascari orderly who accompanied me, and who had already informed me that he knew me quite well because he had seen me in Asmara, suddenly turned to me during the homeward ride and said in his halting Italian: "Please send a telegram to say that the Italians are good to the people."

Here was a third request—General Villa Santa, the non-commissioned officer of the Carabinieri, and now a native soldier. His was perhaps the most touching plea, for the other two came from Italians who knew Europe and political affairs, whereas the Ascari knew nothing except what he had seen with his own eyes.

The following day I took my mule and my Ascari orderly and went for a ride along the foot of the hills, eventually arriving at a *ghebi* on the plain which the General had suggested I should visit as being rather better built than most. Here a pleasant surprise awaited me, for I found the group of native cavalry with whom I had lunched two days before the first advance. How long ago it seemed! But I was remembered and told the news of their adventures. They were now feeling very disconsolate as they had lost a hundred of their best horses from the mysterious disease which attacks them in the plains and for which there is no known remedy. As a result, the officers did not know if they would be able to accompany the Army Corps into the Tembien. The *ghebi* itself, if better built than most, was as like all others as one sardine is to another, and I felt that I had completed my education in Abyssinian domestic architecture, and as I dislike both darkness and dirt I would not visit any more.



The now familiar sound of the shrill, monotonous song of Ascari regiments on the march reached me in my tent at an early hour next morning, and when I went out to investigate what was happening I met the General, who told me that a brigade was starting and he was going to see them off. I followed at a discreet distance, and fell in with an officer who had come up the previous evening to bring the air mail for the mess. He told me that he too wrote, was, in fact, a poet who had published a good deal of verse, and one of his plays was now being filmed in London. My mind was considerably distracted from his conversation by the sight in front of me. The General, towering above his escort of Ascari Lancers, was on some rising ground, and below him the regiments streamed past. Despite the modern weapons of the men and their khaki uniforms, the sight was curiously suggestive of some scene out of the Bible, for there were the flocks and herds, represented by the beef ration walking on its own feet, goats and kids, and a multitude of donkeys. In the distance the men's red tarbooshes had the effect of a red stream flowing across the plain.

My attention was recalled finally to the poet beside me, who was reciting to me two really charming lyrics which he had written in praise of his native town of Verona. For a few moments the African scene was blotted out and I saw the great Scaligeri Castle with its battlements, the swiftly flowing river and the vine-clad hills beyond. I shared to the full the sudden pangs of homesickness which would attack all the Italians, officers and men alike, when they thought of their own country and its beauties.

The mess in which I now found myself as General Pirzio Biroli's guest was, of course, far larger than any which I had yet seen, his staff numbering about thirty. I cherished

the idea that they must have been chosen for their height. I had never seen so many tall men together in my life ; headed, in every sense of the word, by the General, at least half of them stood six feet.

The Brigadier-General commanding the Army Corps artillery was a member of an old Piedmontese family, and was popularly declared to maintain in all their purity the traditions of the Piedmont army before the unification of the Kingdom. When asked his views on some political subject he replied : "I serve the King, I know nothing of politics ; when he gives me my orders, that is enough for me."

"There speaks the true Piedmontese," whispered the chief-of-staff to me.

He felt a kindly but complete superiority over anyone who came from the other provinces, and to hear him dealing with a senior colonel who came from Milan and was naturally ready to uphold the great contribution made by that city to the riches of Italy, was one of the amusements of the mess.

To me, one of the most interesting members of the staff was a "war volunteer", an elderly man who had been all through the 1895-1896 campaign. He had missed death at Amba Alaji with Toselli simply because his orders to join the tiny force had not arrived in time ; he had missed death again at Adowa, where he had been wounded and saved by the devotion of his Ascari. He had a low opinion of the fighting qualities of the Abyssinians, which he held had been vastly exaggerated as a result of the Adowa campaign. "They were always at least ten to one," he said, "and we were short of everything—food and supplies of every kind. The battle at Adowa was more lost by our mistakes than won by Menelik. The proof of our real fighting superiority

was that the Abyssinians had been so roughly handled that they did not dare to follow up their victory, and were actually retreating when Crispi fell and was succeeded by a pack of cowards. If Rome had sent us forty thousand men we could have reconquered all that we had lost and a great deal more. That campaign gave the Abyssinians and the world a totally false impression of their military prowess."

His views, however, were not borne out by the chief-of-staff, who had had many years of colonial service. He thought that the Abyssinians had great military qualities, but they depended entirely on leadership. When I commented on their failure to make any resistance so far (it was the end of November), he replied: "You must remember that these chiefs up here have given no sign of their powers of leadership. We have yet to see how the Imperial troops, who in addition have been trained under European officers, will fight. Our own Ascari are splendid soldiers, and after all they are the same race."

Perhaps with him the wish was father to the thought, for the one thing that all ranks of the Italian Army longed for was to meet the Abyssinians in a fair field and settle the affair once for all. Marching about an empty country looking for an enemy whom you cannot find can become extremely monotonous.

One came to accept it so much as a matter of course that one's luncheon and dinner of macaroni or soup, meat, and tinned fruit should appear punctually even to the moment of the General's watch, that one forgot the real triumph of organization that it represented. As I was allowed to park myself and my typewriter on one of the mess-tables when they were not in use, I was privileged to hear something from the director of the mess of the problems with which

he was faced. The Native Army Corps marched where there were no roads, therefore everything had to be carried on mules, which got lost or fell down precipices, or arrived hours late. He had to plan for days ahead in a country where no supplies were to be had. He had to provide meals at all sorts of odd hours for officers going on, or coming off, duty. "Think of the other Army Corps commands," he said wistfully ; "they have their lorries coming up behind with everything just piled in. Tonight I have to get everything packed because we are marching tomorrow morning. I have to provide a cold meal for the middle of the day, and then tomorrow evening everybody will expect a hot dinner."

Even the wind increased his troubles. One day the large pot containing the soup was blown over and put out the fire at the very moment when the General arrived for luncheon. I could only offer the hard-worked director the Napoleonic consolation that "an army marches on its stomach", and that without him General and staff alike would be unable to do their work.

The question of the title of this book was one which incessantly preoccupied my mind and was a matter of interest in every mess. Many were the suggestions which were made, but it was felt that a Colonel on General Pirzio Biroli's staff had solved the problem most brilliantly when he proposed that it should be called : *With the Barbarous Italians among the Civilized Abyssinians*. This was received with shouts of joy, and it was immediately decided that I must adopt it.

That important matter settled, the General said : "We march tomorrow morning, be ready at 6 a.m." I hastily compared my watch with his ; he was pleased to find that it was even ten minutes faster. "Leave it like that," he said,

and then paid me a compliment which gave me great pleasure—"but you are always punctual." Apart from its rudeness, I felt it would need a much braver person than I am to keep General Pirzio Biroli waiting when he was on the march.

## CHAPTER XI

### MARCHING THROUGH THE TEMBIEN

"TO HORSE!" The General's voice rang out in the still morning air, the trumpet sounded, the first rays of the rising sun shone red on the tips of the lances of a squadron of Native Cavalry raised at the salute, and the Commander-in-Chief of the Native Army Corps rode out of the courtyard with his staff at his heels. Below on the plain the advance guard of the "flying column" was already on the move. The march into the Tembien had begun.

Two divisions had preceded us, the military objective of the operations being to drive out the enemy forces who threatened the Italian communications between Adigrat and Makale, and Adowa and the Tacazzè. The Tembien lay between these two lines of advance, a wild, mountainous, and largely unexplored district; it was, of course, entirely roadless, though crossed by one important mule-track from Adowa to Makale.

"What a people!" commented a staff officer one day in disgust as we struggled at a snail's pace and in single file over a high rocky pass. "This is an important caravan route, and look at it!" At that moment his mule tucked its back legs under it and slid and scrambled down a series of boulders, and I lost the rest of his remarks, which no doubt did justice to the backwardness of the Tembien and its inhabitants. The country did, however, provide an ideal lurking ground for guerilla bands, and it was essential that it should be under Italian control.

After his retreats from Adowa and Makale, Ras Seyum had doubled back, and only the day before he had been established with 4000 men within twenty miles of our line of march. He had fled as soon as the machine-guns came into action, but there were many of his followers still in the district. The "rake-out" (to use the expressive Italian phrase) of the Tembien could only have been undertaken by the Native Army Corps ; no white troops could have carried out such a march owing to difficulties of transport and lack of water. The Ascari live on a handful of flour and a mouthful of water, and sleep on the ground without tents.

As we took up our position in the column, the General explained to me the composition of our force : first, a squadron of cavalry followed by the machine-gun section, the General and his staff, a company of Ascari on each flank, the baggage train, an Ascari battalion, and finally another squadron of cavalry. Immediately behind the staff rode the Conte della Porta, the political officer attached to the Native Army Corps, and a native chief and his attendants ; it was Degiac Delai, a follower of Ras Gugsä. For thirty years he had fought in the civil war which had been endemic in the Tigräi ; for fourteen years he had been an exile from his home, and he was now returning to rule the Eastern Tembien in the name of Ras Gugsä and the Italian Government. One smouldering dark eye looked out from under the white drapery round his head, the other had been lost in some long-ago skirmish ; cartridges gleamed in the wide belt round his waist ; his precious rifle in its red, black, and gold bag was carried immediately behind his mule. I used to wonder what dark thoughts, what bitter memories, what present triumph lurked behind that impassive face. Had I been one of his enemies I should not have awaited his coming.

The first part of our march across the wide Makale plain was easy enough, and we even had a rough track to help us on our way. I had plenty of time to get accustomed to my strange surroundings and to convince myself that it was not a dream ; that I really was riding behind the General of the Native Army Corps into unoccupied territory, that this was war and not simply a pleasant morning ride. I watched the black pennons of the advance squadron fluttering in the breeze as they went pricking across the plain ; I watched the Ascari companies on either flank, their long springing steps carrying them over the rocky trackless country as if they were on a dancing-floor. Far away, filling the northern horizon, was the range of mountains which we were to cross. Were the enemy really waiting for us there ? At the moment war seemed far away, and my mind reverted to my immediate surroundings.

The pace of the march was that of the mules, and I began to feel the deepest sympathy for the General's charger, condemned to a slow walk in the middle of the column. Before the morning was over I was also to feel the deepest admiration for the General as a rider. I had seen his easy, firm seat, but what I now had an opportunity to observe was that he had the hands of the born horseman. He rode his powerful, high-spirited hunter on a snaffle, and there was never any doubt of his complete mastery of the horse, even when "Beldimonio" began to do an elegant step-dance of impatience. "It is the sight of the cavalry which distracts him," said the General almost apologetically ; "he cannot bear to see other horses ahead of him."

After two hours we halted for a quarter of an hour, and I had a fresh proof of the General's eye for a horse and for detail. He had found a small boy at Makale whose mother was dead and whose father had fled with Ras Seyum, and



had decided to send the boy to Rome to be trained as a jockey in his racing-stable. To the General's great amusement this urchin now arrived mounted precariously on an officer's spare horse and carrying with him a bloodstained white cloth. "Where did you get that?" he asked, and the small boy pointed under the saddle. In one moment the General had the saddle off the horse and found a wound in its back which had been caused by a strap which supported the rifle on one side and the sword on the other. The General replaced the cloth, adjusted the strap so that it no longer cut into the horse's back, and I wished the officer could have heard the scorching comments on his ignorance and carelessness to which the General gave utterance as he did so.

Our next halt was on the top of the first of the foothills while the portable wireless was erected and we waited for a message. Behind us lay the plain, and in front the ground fell steeply away. The track had "died on us", and we crept in single file down into another valley and up another hill. The path wound round the summit, with high rocks on one side and on the other a precipitous descent into a valley hundreds of feet below. The path had been worn away till it was barely a foot wide, and it sloped unpleasantly towards the edge. I looked at it with disfavour, but the mule did not seem to mind, and two days later it seemed to me, by comparison, to have been an excellent road. The other side of the hill was a series of rock stairs "as steep as the side of a house", and half a mile farther on we came suddenly upon a river flowing between high banks. Much of the Tembien is waterless, and the ford we crossed was of considerable strategic importance.

The order was given to water the animals, and I wondered if my mule was as thirsty as its rider! In the

interest of watching the start I had set out without even the usual small cup of black coffee ; it was now 1 p.m. and the heat of the sun was scorching. I looked longingly at some trees and hoped that General Pirzio Biroli would give the order for lunch, but he was in a hurry to reach our camping ground for the night, and the trumpet sounded "To horse !" I felt the mule had had the best of it !

We plodded on across another plain, with the mountains closing in on either side of us. There was one more short halt, and finally we saw before us a small wooded hill in the centre of what was now a narrow valley. It was Enda Michael Tucul, and here we were to halt for the night. We climbed half-way up, to find a small *ghebi* and a ruined church in the midst of the euphorbie, and at 3.30 p.m. our march came to an end. In a few minutes the word went round—"luncheon". I climbed a little farther up to find the General established in the shade, and we all dropped down on convenient rocks below him. The mules with the cold food had arrived, tins were opened, knives and forks appeared out of our pockets. Never, I thought, did food and drink taste so delicious. It was a very cheerful party which picnicked on the side of the hill.

An hour later we were strolling about a little saddle from which we could see the mountains on both sides, when suddenly we heard shots across the valley to the west. The picnic atmosphere disappeared—this was war, the enemy was on the opposite mountain. Field-glasses were whipped out, and the General with his staff behind him stood gazing across the valley. Tat-tat-tat came the rattle of machine-gun fire, but the sun was now beginning to disappear behind the mountain, and with its last rays in our eyes it was impossible to see anything. One of our escorting squadrons was ordered off to investigate and, if

necessary, to support the troops who were in action. An aeroplane came zooming up the valley, and we rushed to arrange the long strips of cloth which served as ground signals in an arrow pointing in the direction of the fighting. The 'plane circled round twice to make sure of its direction, and then flew away over the mountain.

The General called up his chief-of-staff and asked for particulars of the dispositions of our escorting troops. I listened at a discreet distance, but near enough to hear the brief report that such and such troops were marching into positions on our front, our right and left flanks, while the rearguard was rapidly approaching. The General approved the orders which had been given, and we continued to stare at the opposite mountain-side, but night and silence fell together ; the action was at an end. Some hours later the squadron of cavalry returned to report that they had been overtaken by darkness before they could find anybody ; the Abyssinians had slipped away.

Our heavy baggage, which included the tents and dinner, had not been able to keep up with the pace of our march, and we settled down to await its arrival with many congratulations that we had left the wind behind at Makale. Even so, I was glad of the bonfire which the officers made. We all sat around it while they sang choruses, mostly the marching songs of the Alpini, interspersed with catches which, to my English ears, seemed oddly familiar ; with a slight change of language "Sir Toby" and "Sir Andrew" might have sung them in "Olivia's" kitchen. The concert was interrupted by the arrival of the baggage train, and the little plateau was covered with men carrying hurricane lanterns and struggling with mules who backed and kicked and tied themselves in knots. Very soon I heard the General's voice asking for me. He was seated at a small

table, and two folding chairs had actually been found for us. The staff perched themselves on a low bank beside us with their plates on their knees. Their bronzed faces were lighted up by the glow of our lamp and the mess fire, the trees behind them showed blue-black against the sky in which hung a young moon and the brilliant stars of the tropic night.

Dinner over, I said laughingly to the General: "What a pity there is nothing to do, that we cannot go to the opera or the cinema, or play a game of bridge."

"But why shouldn't we play bridge?" he replied, and cards were sent for. It was a strange scene, the General and the officers in their greatcoats, our little island of light, and the camp settling down for the night around us. I never thought that I should find myself declaring "no trumps" or "two spades" with an Army Corps General in the midst of an enemy country. The last rubber ended a little after midnight.

"What time tomorrow, Excellency?" (Generals in command of Army Corps are always addressed as "Excellency.")

"Seven o'clock. Sleep well."

There was little need for such advice and, pulling off my boots, I rolled myself in my blankets. There was no water, consequently no possibility of washing; and it hardly seemed worth while taking off my clothes for five hours, with all the complications of finding and putting them on by the light of a candle. I had already learnt that it was as well to be out of one's tent an hour before "the advertised time", and one had also to make allowance for the General's watch.

"A shorter march today, but worse country," said the General as we mounted next morning; "lots of water

tonight," he added with a laugh. I wondered if I looked as dirty as I felt ! Once at the bottom of our hill we scrambled down into a dry watercourse which served as a mule-track, and after a few miles started to climb the big hill ahead. When we were almost at the summit a halt was called and the General and his staff proceeded to study the country. During the whole of the march I was torn with conflicting emotions—a devouring curiosity as to everything that we did and saw, and reluctance to bother busy men with endless questions. The General seemed to understand my frame of mind instinctively, and if I happened to be beside him or, as more frequently happened, jogging along in his wake, he would explain where we were going and what we were doing.

The other side of the hill proved to be easier going than usual, and we finally arrived on a small plain. It was 11 a.m., another halt was called, the wireless was set up in a twinkling, and the baggage-mules arrived with lunch. Water was reported to be near, and the General, with his escort, went off to see for himself.

One of the difficulties of the march was the lack of maps ; the country had never been surveyed and the staff were dependent on the vague reports of natives. Luncheon over, we proceeded to follow the General, and once off out little plateau we found ourselves in a long valley, up and down which were passing thousands of native troops with mules and a sprinkling of camels. We joined in the procession which was going towards the water, and eventually found one of the Carabinieri attached to the Army Corps, who directed us along another valley where he said we should find the General. (One of the advantages of being with Pirzio Biroli was that one could always see him from afar.) The camp was to be pitched in the valley under

the shelter of a high wooded hill ; it was a charming site, but the water which we had been promised resolved itself into a muddy trickle between high banks. There were two Divisions in the neighbourhood, and it was their animals coming down to water which we had met on our way.

The General was seeing and overseeing everything. As he passed me he had time for his usual word of inquiry as to whether I was all right. "Look at the water they promised me," he said. "I am going to see if the pump they are rigging up is working properly. Think what it means to see that two Divisions have something to eat and drink in this desert !"

"And something to wash in, Excellency," I replied, and he passed on, laughing and calling for his mule. I little thought that my very mild joke had sunk in. In less than half an hour one of his own Ascari orderlies arrived carrying a canvas bucket—"With His Excellency's compliments". Never, I decided, would I meditate again on the joys of a hot bath with running water (which was rapidly becoming an obsession with us all). The bath which I achieved with His Excellency's bucket of cold water was the most delicious and the most welcome I had ever had in my life. But there were to be many occasions on the march when undressing or washing seemed dreams of the past and the future. Indeed, it became one of the stock amusements of the staff when we were nearing a camping site to give a vivid and detailed description of the de luxe hotel that we should find, of the baths we should have, and of the dinner we should order. "But," we would add gravely, "we must remember not to throw anything that we don't want on the floor, and not to rinse out our one drinking utensil and hold it out for coffee."

Headed by the General the staff lived hard—we had one

plate, one glass, and the ground to sit on, except on rare occasions when the mule with the little folding tables and chairs arrived in time for dinner. Our food came out of tins except on one unfortunate occasion, when we tried to eat a kid which had been killed the same afternoon. Bread, of course, we never saw; wine, and mineral water—even filtered water which seemed to me to consist almost entirely of chloride—had to be carefully rationed on most days. When I returned to Asmara I heard many bitter complaints from journalists who had not been on the march, but as they grumbled at the food in Asmara, and wanted their cocktails and their whisky regularly, I wondered how they would have enjoyed our Spartan life!

That night the valley and the hillsides sparkled with the lights of the camp-fires; a whole city seemed to have sprung into life around us, but even before we settled down to our first rubber the fires had died away and the country lay dark and silent under the moon. Except the bridge-players, everyone in the Native Army Corps went early to bed.

The next day we did not strike camp until 9 a.m., in order to let a column ahead of us get well on its way. Ever since our departure from Makale we had been climbing steadily upwards, and now we were just below the crest of the great mountain rampart on the other side of which lay the eastern plain of the Tembien. There we were to meet General Diamanti and his Group of Blackshirts, who were marching across from the north-east, making a road as they came. Between us and the "promised land" lay the Passo Abarò, spoken of even by the General in tones of respect, and with dark hints by the staff—"Wait till you see it". But in the bewildering interests of every day I paid but little attention to their warnings, though indeed no words would

have given me an adequate idea of the pass. It had been intended that we should cross it that day, but even an Army Corps General found it impossible to work to a time-table in that mountainous and mapless country. The large valley was once again full of native troops and pack animals, and as we threaded our way through, the General would rein up and question each commanding officer. "Battalion? Company? Where are you coming from? Where are you going? All well? Are you getting your rations?" The questions would come like rapid fire and the officers would answer in the same way, then with a few friendly words of encouragement the General would ride on.

We climbed a long rise, threaded our way through some hills with native artillery dotted here and there along our line of march, down into a deep valley, and then started on a long ascent. Under some sycamores at the summit the General gave the order to dismount. We walked a few yards and found ourselves on the top of the world. Below us the cliff fell sheer away for thousands of feet, and we looked across the Tembien plain to the foothills and then the mountain peaks above Adowa and Axum. To the east was another great line of mountains with broken country between, behind us the foothills through which we had ridden, and beneath us to the west was the narrow saddle of the Passo Abarò. North, east, and west the world was circled by mountains—they were seventy, eighty, a hundred miles away? There was no means of finding out, the staff were too busy to be bothered with idle questions, and distance counted for so little in Eritrea and the Tigray; the problem always was, not how many miles, but how many days' march, and that depended on the nature of the country.

Having studied the panoramas on every side I turned



my attention to the scene immediately beneath us, which the General and his chief of staff were studying so intently. The saddle was crammed with men, mules, and camels; the animals were mostly unloaded and picketed on some level ground, while a column of troops was creeping along in single file with many halts; indeed, they seemed more frequently to stand still than to advance. Evidently getting down the pass was an even more difficult business than was expected. It was not necessary to be a military expert to see that there was little likelihood of our being able to continue our march that day.

"Luncheon," said the General.

Suddenly across the valley in our rear we heard the sharp reports of rifle-fire. There was nothing to be seen until a great wave of fire swept across some native huts which we had passed a few hours previously. The firing and the flames died down and we returned to our cigarettes. Some hours later we heard that the Carabinieri had been fired upon from the huts and had set them on fire. It did not represent a serious loss, as the Abyssinians have no possessions; the stone walls would not be affected, and the roofs made of branches and grass would quickly be replaced. The General rode off to investigate things at the head of the pass for himself, and very soon we heard that we were to camp there for the night.

It was not a comfortable spot; the small platforms on which the tents were pitched were covered with stones of all sizes from pebbles to boulders, a harsh and prickly grass grew between, varied by shrubs with vicious thorns. There was, of course, no water, and as the sun disappeared behind the hill which closed the western side of the pass an ominous chill came in the air. Viewed from below it was possible to see that the cliff above us had an overhanging

ledge of rock, and beneath this was a kind of natural gallery with a couple of rough stone huts huddled into the narrow space. How anything except a bird ever got there I never discovered, but there must have been some way down from above.

"Those," explained the Conte della Porta, "belonged to the brigands who levied tolls on the travellers using the pass. They were driven out yesterday. They would not attack large caravans, but only small parties."

I felt that I had wandered out of my own century back into the early Middle Ages. I must have looked my surprise, for the Conte della Porta went on to say: "But you don't understand the social and political system in Abyssinia. If a man here is ambitious, or fond of money, he naturally becomes a brigand; he gathers a few followers together, and if he makes a success of his profession he increases their numbers. He loots caravans, imposes illegal taxes, and eventually becomes a power, then the central authorities take him into partnership on a sharing basis, and he establishes himself as an important chief."

I thought of the unfortunate peasants who were stripped of what little they possessed by both the chief and the local brigand, and did not wonder that many of them welcomed the prospect of Italian rule, which they knew would bring peace and security.

As night fell, an icy wind began to roar through the pass and threatened to carry us and our tents on to the plain without further effort on our part. Muffled up to the eyes, we ate our dinner precariously as we cowered behind rocks and tried to wedge ourselves so securely that neither we nor our plates would slide down the precipitous hillside. The flames of the mess-fire waved madly in the wind and flickered over our crouching figures, while a few camp-fires

glowed fitfully on the other side of the little valley. It was a reproduction of a Goya picture of the bivouacs in the guerilla warfare between the French and the Spaniards in the days of Napoleon.

The next morning as the sun rose we began the descent of the pass; when I saw the sheer mountainside I wondered how men or animals could find or keep their footing. What path there was turned and twisted every few yards between and over rocks, and every turn meant a steep drop. We looked down on the tops of the lances of the cavalry who were leading their nimble, light Abyssinian horses; the staff dismounted, handed their mules to their orderlies, and proceeded to climb cautiously down. I looked at the descent and decided that my mule knew far more about the business than I did, and that I felt safer on its back than on my own feet. I seldom saw more than the tips of its grey ears, for its wise little head was down between its knees choosing every foothold. It would gather its legs under it on the top of each successive boulder and then jump down on to the path below, executing practically a right-angled turn as it did so.

At the worst part of the descent the General was immediately behind me; even he had dismounted, and his nailed boots were slipping at every moment on what was now a bare rock face, and my mule had the honour of giving a lead to his charger. The General covered the little creature with compliments: "Never have I seen such a clever animal. Look at the way it puts its feet into a niche; it is not a mule, it is a cat." It was difficult to believe that it did not understand what was being said about it, as with a self-satisfied air it proceeded to give an exhibition of fancy skating, ending up with a neat jump at the bottom. "Bravo!" cried the General,

My only part in the proceedings was purely passive. Mercifully an Italian military saddle, with one's great-coat rolled and strapped in front, provides a splendid grip for one's knees, so all that I had to do was to sit back and leave the mule to its own most competent devices.

Later in the day I tried to give a description of the pass to an Italian officer, but words failed me and I said : "Even the General dismounted."

"That is quite enough to tell me what it is like," said my listener ; "it must be awful !" Indeed, those of us who made that famous descent gave ourselves airs of superiority in the future. In answer to any description of hard living and difficult country, we always replied : "Ah, but you have not crossed the Passo Abarò."

There was no gentle slope to mark the transition between the mountain-side and the plain ; at one moment we were scrambling down the face of the cliff, at the next we stood on level ground. In two and a half hours we had descended 7000 feet. Above us to the right a mountain ran out into the plain in shape like the bows of a battleship with superimposed turrets—if it is possible to imagine a battleship rising nearly 8000 feet above the water-line. On our left was a high *amba*, on the edge of which I saw some figures.

"That is a company that has been protecting our flank," remarked the General, and then raised his voice : "Who are you ?"

"Such a company, such a battalion, Excellency."

"You have done very well."

"Salute His Excellency !"

Suddenly the edge of the cliff was lined with Ascari and their wild cry floated down on the hot air. The plain with its sandy soil and stunted trees seemed to me very dull after

the mountains among which we had been wandering, and I began to look forward to seeing the meeting between His Excellency and General Diamanti. My mind reverted idly to the picture, beloved in nurseries in the days of my youth, of the meeting between Wellington and Blücher after Waterloo, and I laughed at the comparison. The Brigadier had had nothing to do except march in a leisurely fashion across the plain, making a road as he came, followed by his baggage and supplies. I visualized him arriving with a smart staff at his heels to report to the Army Corps Commander and presenting a remarkable contrast to the Army Corps staff, who, owing to lack of water, had been able neither to wash nor to shave that morning and who had now acquired a coating of dust as the result of our march.

The reality was very different. A young man without his helmet and with his sleeves rolled up above his elbows suddenly appeared from under some trees on our line of march and flung up his hand in the Fascist salute. I thought first of all that it was the Commander of one of the Ascari battalions who had been taken unawares by the General, when to my surprise I heard His Excellency greet him as "Diamanti". I looked with interest at the "youngest general in the world"; at this time Diamanti was thirty-eight, had fought in the World War, ending as a captain in the Artillery, had been a Fascist since the formation of the Party, an active officer in the National Militia, and was now the only Black Shirt holding the rank of general in the field. Of medium height and strongly built, he had light-brown hair, beard and moustache, a ready smile, and in the following days I learnt to know his quick wit and friendly laughter.

He stood at His Excellency's stirrup making a rapid informal report—there had been no resistance, the road was

now available for *auto-carretti*, and he had chosen a site for the General's camp about two hours' ride away, where there was plenty of water. (It should be explained that *auto-carretti* were a special kind of small motor-lorries with solid tyres and wheels which, I was told, worked "each on its own"; they could therefore negotiate the roughest tracks and prided themselves on keeping up immediately behind an advance. Many inquiries failed to discover any English translation of the word, as they are not used in the British Army.) There was, however, some water for the animals nearer than the site of the camp, and His Excellency decided to halt in order to receive the morning wireless message and to consult further with Diamanti and the chief of staff. We all settled down under convenient trees, for the sun was hot in the middle of the day. Even after three days it was strange to see the semblance of a road again and General Diamanti's car, which had struggled up from the Hauzien.

A baggage-train of mules passed close to the spot where we were eating our lunch, and the General sent for the officer in command. Pirzio Biroli had one of the best tempers I ever saw in my life, and this was the only occasion on which I saw him really angry. He cross-examined the officer closely about his work—the number of his mules, their loads, the average march, the losses by death or sickness, how many days the animals were kept at work without a rest, the supply of forage, and other technical matters. The officer was a middle-aged man with a row of medal ribbons which told of service in the World War and in Lybia, and I imagined that he must have been a volunteer. He answered every question as quickly as it was asked. The cross-examination at an end, the General said what he thought of the authority who was overworking and over-

loading the mules in the way in which the officer had described.

"I know it is not your fault," he assured the officer, "you are simply carrying out the orders you have received. But these people are mad. Do they want to kill every transport animal in the country and leave me immobilized and helpless? How long do they think the mules will live if they are overworked in this way?"

It was obvious that the officer entirely shared the General's views, and he agreed with almost pathetic eagerness.

"There is plenty of fine grazing for them in this part of the country, so feed them up all you can; I will deal with the other matter." It was not only the animal lover who was speaking, it was the General in the midst of a campaign which depended for its success on an adequate supply of transport—*la guerra logistica*, not only of roads and motor-lorries but of mules and mountain paths. "But you, have you had anything to eat? Won't you join us?" asked the General.

The officer excused himself, he was in a hurry and would eat later; so with the usual kindly words the General sent him on his way. It was another of Pirzio Biroli's characteristics never to forget that if men are to work they must also eat, and no officer ever came to make a report or receive orders without being asked to any meal that was available.

General Diamanti had certainly chosen a most charming site for our camp. To the south lay the line of mountains, on the west a high *amba* on the top of which were his own tents, while on the other two sides was a semicircle of trees with the exotic suggestion of an English park. The illusion was completed by a cuckoo which called incessantly in the great sycamore under which the General's tent was pitched.

We ate our dinner with more comfort, if less picturesqueness, than on the previous night. A general on Marshal Badoglio's staff was an honoured guest. He had arrived in a car by General Diamanti's road, and did not seem to have enjoyed the experience much, nor, it must be confessed, did he seem enthusiastic about the simplicity of life with the Command of the Native Army Corps, although he was treated with every consideration—he was given a box to sit on and two plates to eat off. I felt that he would return with relief to the comparative luxury of Adigrat.

"Tomorrow," said His Excellency, as we strolled back to our tents in the moonlight, "we shall rest." But his idea of rest did not consist of lying "late abed". At 6.30 a.m. I heard his voice inquiring as to the well-being of the mules, at 6.45 a bucket of water arrived, and at 7 a.m. a glass of coffee. We did, however, spend the day in camp, the only excitement being the occasional crack of a rifle-shot in the distance.

That night General Diamanti came to dinner, and despite the fact that we were marching at 6.30 next morning several of us accepted his invitation to go back with him to his mess. We scrambled up with him on to the top of the *amba*, and in the big tent I had the pleasure of seeing again the officers whom I had met in the far-off days of my first arrival in the colony. They were all in the best of health and spirits, though they complained that they did not seem to do very much except march about the country and make roads. Their "sufferings", however, received but little sympathy as we compared our vagabond existence with the "comforts" which they enjoyed. Their mess president was evidently most efficient and knew how to make the best use of his motor-lorries.

At last it was decided that if it was to be worth while



going to bed at all, we had better go home, and General Diamanti very kindly said that he would send us back in a light lorry which had made its appearance. There must have been some way of getting off the *amba*, but the driver did not know it, and after he had driven for some distance in the opposite direction to our camp, the officers decided that it would be quicker to get out and walk. We tramped home, mercifully under a bright moon, and the next day tried to dramatize our adventure of being "lost in East Africa" and defending ourselves from the combined attacks of lions, jackals, and hyenas. I confessed, however, that my fear had been that we might very naturally be fired on by the sentries, for, in our anxiety not to wake General Diamanti, I considered we had skulked past his camp in a most suspicious manner.

## CHAPTER XII

### ABBI ADDI AND THE PROCLAMATION OF A CHIEF

ABBI ADDI was the chief town in the Eastern Tembien and the "seat of government", and there Delai was to be proclaimed ruler. The previous day at lunch the General had explained his plans to the collected staff. "General Diamanti and his brigade will march early tomorrow morning and I shall follow. I intend only to take a skeleton staff with me, the rest will remain here with the baggage and rejoin me at Melfà two days later. I have chosen Diamanti's brigade, as I desire to invest the ceremony with all possible solemnity, and in order to do this I wish to have a battalion of white troops on parade."

I endured a moment of horrid fear; should I not be left behind with the main body and miss what promised to be the climax of our march? However, the General nodded kindly at me and said: "You shall come." It was therefore a select party of half a dozen, with our cavalry escort and a squadron of mounted Carabinieri, which set out next morning, but once we left the seclusion of our "park" we found the plain absolutely alive with troops, in camp and on the march. There were Ascari battalions and mountain batteries, and all the paraphernalia and impedimenta of the best part of a division, and halts were frequent as the General conferred with commanding officers. There were also light tanks which were trying to follow Diamanti; I must say that I shared my mule's

horror of these vicious-looking little monsters, and sympathized with its determination to shy at the sight and sound of one roaring and clattering across the country. The going, however, rapidly became too bad even for light tanks, and I was thankful to leave them behind.

As we jogged along we heard the incessant crackle of rifle-fire at the foot of the hills to our left. The General called up the Carabinieri Colonel: "I must know the reason of those shots and who is firing." Our own cavalry patrol on that flank was obviously not taking any interest in the affair but continuing quietly on its way, so the firing was clearly at some distance. Presently a native appeared, and through the interpreter informed the chief of staff that fighting was going on between the local inhabitants and the "bandits"—bandits being a kind of generic term at the moment used to describe both Ras Seyum's men and the regular professionals.

"Tell the people," said the chief of staff, "that the Italians are here to protect them from the bandits."

"But you must tell your men to be careful," insisted the native, "it is not safe what they do."

The chief of staff nodded and turned to another officer. "Look at those Black Shirts over there," he said, pointing to some men who were strolling along at some considerable distance from the main body, "they must be forbidden to do it."

Indeed, at that time the Italian Army had met with so little resistance in the Tigray, the Abyssinians had shown so little initiative in attacking or even sniping on the lines of communication, that all ranks were inclined to forget the possibility of danger. Things were, however, to be tightened up, and when I got back to



*Above* OUR BAGGAGE COLUMN IN THE TEMBIEN

*Below* AN ASCARI OUTPOST



WE FIND WATER IN THE TLMBIEN

Asmara I was told that all motor traffic on the roads in the occupied territory was only allowed to proceed by daylight, as there had been loss of life owing to attacks on isolated convoys.

We had now taken our places in our column. My mule was bored and sulky, its little hooves, which were so quick and nimble on the rocky mountain-sides, sank deep into the sandy track ; the sun became hot overhead, the dust rose in clouds, the halts became frequent as the Black Shirts ahead struggled in single file over the long saddle which closed the westward end of the plain. I sympathized with my mule and longed for the stony paths and solitude of the mountains. The native information about the distance to Abbi Addi had been as vague as usual : "It takes us six hours ; at the pace you march it will probably take you nine." As a matter of fact, given a clear road we could probably have done it in about five hours.

Deputations of local inhabitants also began to impede our way. We would find little groups—a man who boasted himself a chief because he owned a rifle and had half a dozen ragged followers at his heels ; a Coptic priest with a tattered umbrella, his shabby cross carried by a dirty boy and a few attendants behind him. The General would rein up for a moment to greet them, and then refer them to their returning chief and the Political Commissioner ; but politics could wait for the moment, and they remained gazing at Pirzio Biroli—the big man on his splendid horse, towering above his followers. Here was a type they could understand and admire, a great soldier, a great "Ras".

At about eleven o'clock the General, taking a couple of Lancers with him, cantered off up the line of the column

to see how things were ahead, and presently we began to climb up the rocky track which led over the saddle. It was, of course, nothing to us "mountaineers", but I was sorry for the Black Shirts toiling up in the heat with their heavy packs. One thing to be remembered about the marvellous marching powers of the Ascari—their pace and their staying-power—is that they carry nothing except a rifle and their belt of cartridges; even their water-bottles they will hang on any convenient mule, whereas a European soldier has to trudge along carrying an enormous weight.

A stop under a convenient tree on a little plateau for lunch, and we then rode on through a narrow defile and out on to the top of the saddle, with some high red cliffs on our left. There were curious hieroglyphics scratched on their face, which Conte della Porta (a mine of information about the country) said were important prehistoric drawings well worthy of the attention of archaeologists. There were also some caves which I felt had been but recently abandoned by their brigand inhabitants.

The country was becoming richer at every step; quite a large village was tucked snugly into a sheltered and sunny position as we began the descent of the saddle. The biggest deputation which had yet appeared was drawn up to receive us, and the Conte della Porta and Delai exchanged many greetings with the head men and priests. I saw them all again at the ceremony the following morning.

There was yet another rise with another village, and then we looked down on Abbi Addi. The hills at the back rose in sheer precipices, spurs like encircling arms ran out into the plain, through the wide gap to the west we could see the fantastic peaks of the Semien mountains.

Deep gorges separated the hills on either side from the little plateau, and Abbi Addi itself crouched as it were in the seat of a colossal arm-chair. We climbed down off the eastern spur and saw the pennons of the General's Lancers fluttering over some level land just below the village. Here and there scraps of white, or even red, white and green, rags floated above the tuculs, and natives stood about watching us with curious eyes. Ascari battalions, mountain batteries, and native cavalry were marching into their positions. Diamanti and his brigade were holding the western spur. Officers arrived to make reports or receive orders, long lines of animals began to pass below us on their way down to water in the river, which ran through the gorge below the village, the distant plain turned to a sea of golden light which stretched away to the violet range of the Semien heights.

The last rays of the setting sun lit up a grim little procession: on a stretcher lay the body of a "bandit" which was being carried away for burial. The native non-commissioned officer in charge informed the General that the man was one of three who had fired on the battalion from behind. It was a strange scene. The soldier, revolver in hand and a fierce delight in his eyes, demonstrating how he had killed the man, the General listening gravely, the dead "bandit" with the great brown stain on his dingy draperies, and his serene, peaceful face—he had died a quick and easy death. The bearers picked up the stretcher and the party disappeared into the gathering darkness.

A more cheerful sight was a small deputation which arrived to wait on the General. They announced themselves as coming from a distant part of the Tembien, but evidently the native intelligence service had been



working as efficiently as usual, and they were thoroughly well informed about the general situation. They had come on behalf of their district to say that they hoped to see the Italians arrive very soon. "To show how pleased we are to see the Italians in the Tigrai, and as a proof of our good faith, we have brought you this." A man in the rear rank produced a half-filled sack, and the leader, with great pride, presented it to the General's orderly, who was acting as interpreter. Pirzio Biroli told them how glad he was to see them, that the Italian troops would soon be marching into their district, and expressed his thanks and appreciation of the rather pathetic little offering, which proved to consist of a few pounds of oats. He said that he would gladly accept a small quantity to give to his horse; this, however, produced such an outcry that he had quickly to yield with a good grace and accept all that they had brought. Very pleased with themselves, the General, and the result of their embassy, the deputation departed.

General Diamanti came to dinner. He was, I felt, a man who should always be sent ahead to occupy a country. We were still enjoying the last of a hundred chickens which he had collected in anticipation of our arrival on the Tembien plain. That night at dinner dessert appeared in the shape of the most delicious little bananas which the Black Shirts had already found time to gather in the garden of Ras Seyum, who, of course, had a *ghebè* at Abbi Addi. While we were strolling about waiting for dinner to be ready, General Diamanti mentioned quite casually that if only we had arrived a little earlier we should have been in time for what he described as "quite a nice little engagement". His advance guard, it appeared, had been in action with some retreating Abyssinian troops, and

he was just preparing to go up to the front line to see what was happening when His Excellency, with his two Lancers, appeared on the little plateau.

"Of course," said Diamanti in the most aggrieved tone, "he was miles in front of his escort, and here was I with my advance guard in action and the General commanding the Army Corps on my hands. I was just starting to go up to the front line to see what was happening, but I knew if I said so he would have wanted to come too. A nice position I should have been in if anything had happened to him; I had to stay here to protect him." (The vision of Diamanti, who came about up to Pirzio Biroli's shoulder, "protecting him" was too much for my gravity, but Diamanti was too full of his grievance to pay any attention to my expression.) "And," he reiterated bitterly, "he prevented me from going up to the front line."

A more complete and naïve instance of the pot calling the kettle black it has never been my fortune to meet. The consternation of the officer in command of the advance guard at the appearance of Diamanti would probably have been exactly the same as when Diamanti saw the Army Corps General arrive. I seemed fated to know Italian generals with a passion for being in places where generals are not usually found.

Dinner over, a small party settled down around the fire on which it had been cooked and plunged into a long and intricate discussion on England's attitude on Italian action, the League of Nations, and the international situation in general, reaching the final conclusion that the nations of Europe were mad to quarrel in view of the many dangers which threatened Western civilization. The only difficulty about the discussion was that General

Diamanti and I were both inclined to talk at once, but it did not prevent us from hearing what the other was saying. It was extraordinarily interesting and instructive to listen to the views of one of the most prominent of the younger Fascists, and one forgot how strange it was to be arguing the more intricate points of the Treaty of Versailles and the Covenant of the League by a camp-fire in the heart of the Tembien.

Abbi Addi was the first town or village which I had seen in the Tigray that could, by any stretch of the imagination, be called "pretty" or "picturesque". Trees—real trees, not stunted thorn bushes—rose above the pointed, conical roofs of the *tuculs*, a great sycamore grew in the wide market-place outside the gateway in the wall of the *ghebè* of Ras Seyum. On the far side of the "palace" the ground fell away to the deep gorge, with the river at the bottom and the palms and trees of the "garden" from which the bananas had come. Here for once was a green and pleasant land. The *ghebè* itself was in ruins, but in one of the courtyards was a fine *tukul* in which were lodged some prisoners who had been captured the day before; they differed in no way from the ordinary peasants of the countryside, and were, I felt, far better off than their brothers-in-arms. They were probably better housed than they had ever been before, they were getting regular meals instead of wandering aimlessly about the country, dependent on pillage to keep themselves alive, in addition to the risk of being killed by either the Italians or the local inhabitants. They certainly did not look at all dejected by their fate.

A flagstaff had been erected in the centre of the market-square. A battalion of Black Shirts marched in and formed three sides of a hollow square. A party of

Coptic priests, with their brilliant umbrellas and bright vestments, issued out of the gateway of the "palace" and took up a position behind the troops ; they were followed by the Mussulmen with their red and green banners, while a group of women, their buttered heads shining and smelling in the sun, kept up their shrill cry of welcome. General Pirzio Biroli, a squadron of native Carabinieri jingling at his heels, rode slowly into the market-place. One day during the march he had happened to tell me that his family was of Spanish origin, having settled in Piedmont during the sixteenth century. This explained to me why his appearance had always been puzzlingly familiar; the Spanish strain is perhaps the strongest in the world and will persist for generations. At this time he wore a small, pointed beard, and I remembered that I had seen his prototype in many a picture gallery in Spain. That morning it was a Spanish hidalgo of the Renaissance who rode slowly past the saluting troops. I thought again how wise a choice had been made by the Italian authorities when they sent Pirzio Biroli to command the Native Army Corps. In addition to his brilliant record in the field, here was a man whose appearance was of inestimable advantage in dealing with a primitive and warlike people, for the first glance proclaimed him the born soldier and leader of men.

"Ask Degiac Delai to present himself," said the General as he drew rein in the middle of the square. Accompanied by the Conte della Porta and his bodyguard, the old chief came out of the *ghebi* and took his stand near the flagstaff. The picturesqueness of the occasion was rather marred by the fact that on top of his white draperies he wore one of the black native cloaks (which always suggested to my mind the "golf capes" of the

days of my extreme youth), and his head was crowned by a grey Homburg hat.

The General gave the order, the bugle sounded, and the troops presented arms as the Italian flag was hoisted. With the tricolour streaming in the breeze above his head, Pirzio Biroli, through his interpreter, addressed the chief and the priests and local representatives. I reflected that it was a pity that all politicians were not sent to school to the Italian generals in order to learn to make speeches which were brief and to the point. He announced that in the name of the King of Italy he had come to proclaim the Tigrai under the protection of Italy, and in the name of the King and Ras Gugsa to instal Degiac Delai as the representative of Ras Gugsa in the Eastern Tembien. "You know that Italian rule means peace and justice for all; be faithful to the Government and your chief."

The old man came forward and kissed the ground and the General's foot in sign of loyalty, and then walked slowly back to the *ghebi*; he enjoyed his own again. The troops marched past, and the brief ceremony was at an end.

When we got back to camp our tents had already been struck, we ate a hasty luncheon and mounted and rode away, leaving General Diamanti and his brigade to see to the further settlement of the country. Our objective was Melfà, a village in the middle of an important district which lay behind the range of hills above Abbi Addi. It had originally been the General's intention to rejoin our column, the remainder of the staff, and—most important of all—our food supplies that evening. The native information about the best "road" to Melfà made him think that it would be very much

better to postpone the meeting till the next evening if we had sufficient food. The temporary mess president had been told that he need only bring provisions for three meals; being evidently a cautious man, he had brought an extra stock with him and reported that he thought he could feed us for another day. It had, therefore, been decided that we should make a short march that afternoon and proceed to Melfà the next day.

We climbed up once again on to the wide saddle along which we had ridden the previous day, and then struck off along a track under the range of mountains. On the *ambas* above us we saw small collections of native huts, and from them there floated down the shrill cries of the women—"Ai, ai, ai"—which might have been the voices of spirits haunting the rocks. Our cavalry escort, ahead and on each flank, were threading their way in and out of the low trees which dotted the plain, the afternoon sun beat fiercely down, and the little column crept slowly along the rough track. I tried to think of London at that hour on a December afternoon; probably it was dark and cold and wet; the motor-buses would be churning up the mud and the streets would be filled with people going about their Christmas shopping. It seemed not merely another life but another world, one from which I was cut off both in time and space. We had left Makale only five days previously, but now I felt as if the only existence I had ever known was riding through the Tembien with the Native Army Corps.

The General had been ranging out on each side of the column trying to give his horse a little exercise, and at about 4 p.m. he shouted an order from a spur of the hills and we swung off to join him. He had chosen the site of our camp and was busy giving orders about the

positions to be occupied by our escort. It was a pleasant place, with real trees for shade and rocks which provided convenient seats. Only one thing was lacking—water, but the animals had had plenty of good water that morning, and as for washing, that would have to be postponed till we reached Melfà.

Far away on the edge of the plain below us we could see most of the 1st Division on the march. "We shall join up with them tomorrow," said the General.

The next day we were to experience the maddening inaccuracy of native information. We did not start till 8 a.m., in order to give some of the troops time to get over what the General had been told was "a low pass with a good road"; we arrived at its foot in about an hour, to find the valley crammed with regiments and baggage-trains, and we looked up to see a sort of miniature Passo Abarò. The block at the moment was complete, and we could see men and animals which looked like ants on the steep zigzags of the mountain-side. The General said what he thought of the native guide and his information. "Half an hour's halt," he said, swinging himself off his horse, "and then we will take it slowly."

Had we not been down the Passo Abarò I might have been impressed with the steepness of the track up which we climbed in single file for an hour. My little mule had turned into an exhibitionist of the worst kind; on the plain nothing would induce him to do anything but plod along in the wake of the next ahead, but the General's praise appeared to have gone to his head, and, set him to climb up or down a pass, and he seemed determined to display his virtuosity and to choose the most difficult and dangerous way. By this time I had such complete confidence in him that I did not dream of

interfering with his tight-rope performances. He had another peculiarity which I had never before seen in an animal—he was passionately interested in the view; when he came to a vantage point he would cling to the edge of any precipice, and with his ears pricked would stand staring out over the landscape until his nature worship had to be cut short in response to the mingled pathos and indignation of the Italian officers in the rear.

When we finally reached the top of the pass we found ourselves on a great *amba*, and the General, with the eye of a soldier and a hunting man, picked out a smudge on a hillside many miles away and below us. "That must be Melfà," he said. "Ask that guide, who is an imbecile, if there is any water near. I think there must be some in that valley." Before the native non-commissioned officer had time to translate the answer a native appeared by the roadside and saluted the General. "Find out what it is he wants," said Pirzio Biroli with his usual friendly patience.

"He is a former Ascari, Excellency, such and such a battalion and regiment. He is a native of Melfà."

"Thank heaven," said the General, "he may have a little human intelligence. Tell him to come with us and ask him which is the best road and where we can find water."

The man, whose wits had been sharpened by his service, proved to know the way and reported good water; indeed, in a wide, green valley there was actually a running stream. We lunched beside it while the animals drank their fill, and our cavalry regiment dismounted at a little distance. Their lances with the black pennons planted in the ground, their grey horses and a long, low



hill beyond, made one of the officers suddenly exclaim: "Look, it is the picture of the bivouac at Austerlitz!" It was strange to see it reproduced in the Tembien.

Melfa stood on the edge of a little plateau and looked prosperous—for an Abyssinian village. There was what was described to me as one of the largest churches in this part of the country, so I climbed down the hillside to see it. Surrounded by the usual wall and untidy grass-plot, it had been built about sixty years ago, and the outer wall of the sanctuary had been decorated at the expense of Ras Seyum. The pictures were absolutely conventional and standardized, with the usual Byzantine influence. I came to the conclusion that the churches and their decorations in this part of the country were some of the worst results of mass production.

Darkness fell, but there was no sign of the other members of the staff, or, what was more important at the moment, of the baggage-train with provisions, so the General decreed that we should eat what we had got. Soup there was, but when the next course appeared the General inquired what it was.

"I don't quite know, Your Excellency," said an embarrassed director of the mess. "I think it is mostly peas!"

Two precious bottles of mineral water remained and were carefully rationed out, but no wine. "If the mules arrive before nine o'clock we will end up with a glass of wine," decreed the General. Just as we had finished, under the light of the rising moon we heard hooves and voices in the distance and the advance party of the staff arrived. We greeted them with the information that we had eaten the last scrap of food and finished the mineral water, so

we were sorry we could not ask them to dinner. They said that supplies were but a short distance behind, and explained that they too had been held up at the foot of the pass.

An icy wind had begun to blow and I felt that the only place where I was likely to be warm was in bed, so I retired to my tent, while the arriving column seemed to surge round me like a rising tide ; orders were shouted, mules clattered and stumbled among the stones, Ascari chattered shrilly as they erected the tents. Dominating it all would come the General's cheerful voice inquiring into the well-being of officers and animals, sending tired men off to get something to eat and drink and suggesting "eligible sites" for the pitching of tents.

Our march the next day took us over easy country. We found many signs of recent fighting in one of the valleys for we passed burnt tuculs, but the enemy had vanished. We slept that night at our former camping-ground at Torrente Meretta ; this time we had it to ourselves except for the bitter wind.

"A very short march today," said His Excellency, as we rode off the following morning, "then tomorrow another short stage and we shall be at Makale." We climbed over a long pass, and from the top we looked down on the little hill of Enda Micael Tucul and away to the hills above Makale. When we got down into the valley we found it alive with troops, an Ascari regiment was in possession of Enda Micael Tucul, and when we pushed on to the ford, where we had watered the horses and mules on our first march, we found most of the 1st Division established on its banks. His Excellency stopped for a conference with the General in command, while the rest of us rode slowly on. Where there had been

the narrow rock-strewn path ten days before, there was now a track on which it was possible for two people to pass. A little farther on we came upon a brigade camp, and the sight of General del Marzio's mess-tent suggested a call. He rose nobly to the occasion, and although he had only just arrived himself he conjured coffee and mineral water out of a very dry land.

Our "short march" was certainly lengthening out; it was now five o'clock. Instead of spending another night on the road the General had decided to push right through and to camp just short of Makale, but nobody knew precisely where. "His Excellency is certain to stop," General del Marzio assured us as we sat back luxuriously sipping our drinks, but suddenly the "look-out man" arrived breathless, to tell us the General was passing, so we hastily remounted and set off in pursuit. The long column wound slowly across the plain, darkness fell, a full moon rose over the mountains, and by its light we saw the familiar pennons stuck into the ground between some cornfields and a little stream; at 7.30 we dismounted. We had reached our last camp.

In ten days the General's column had marched over 200 miles through a roadless mountain country, and the Native Army Corps had accomplished the task which had been set it. There had been no serious fighting, but the main enemy forces had been driven out and no longer threatened the Italian lines of communication. Small parties might make their way back, and brigands lurking in the hills might make sporadic attacks; policing the Tembien would be a slow and difficult business, but those white spaces on the staff maps could now be filled in, and the strategic points to be held could be decided upon. So far as I could judge, the Italians would have

the support of the law-abiding population; the mere knowledge of the presence of troops in the neighbourhood had given the farmers courage to fight against the bandits and the small parties of Ras Seyum's men. The villages we had passed, and the little deputations that waited beside the mule-tracks, had welcomed the General and his men. Abbi Addi and Melfa had greeted the Italians as friends. I thought of the valleys which might be so fertile, and of the slow process of the education of the inhabitants which would be the next task of the Italians in the Tembien. Some day the stony tracks along which we had ridden would be serviceable roads carrying the produce of the countryside; the lepers who had held up their fingerless hands for charity would be cared for; the diseases which are now endemic as the result of dirt, starvation, and ignorance would be stamped out; little girls would no longer be married at four years old and exposed to sufferings too horrible to be described in these pages; brigandage would cease to be a profitable profession; the peasants would no longer be afraid to grow more than would supply their bare needs; the justice for which they had cried to the General would be theirs by right.

That last night the General looked up from his cards with a smile, "Don't forget to describe this," he said to me, "this end to our march through the Tembien, how we sat playing bridge by the light of the full moon while the hyenas howled in the corn around us."

"I shall not forget, Your Excellency."

How, indeed, could I ever forget the most trivial detail of our march through the Tembien? It was hard to believe that never again should I see the sun rise over the mountains; that never again should I hear the General

give the order "To horse !" and watch him swing himself into his saddle as the trumpet sounded ; that never again should I see that martial figure riding past the saluting lines of the Lancer escort ; that never again should I hear the chant of an Ascari regiment on the march.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A NAVAL INTERLUDE

ONE evening during the latter part of the march I heard that a radiogram had been received from the High Command containing an order that all journalists were to proceed to Asmara "immediately". Immediately in my case was necessarily a relative term, as, short of detaching a battalion to escort me to Makale, there was no possibility of my leaving the Tembien. The day after our arrival at Makale another radiogram announced that the High Command was sending a car to take me to Adigrat, and that evening it duly appeared. Many were the jokes about the "concentration camp" at Asmara. I little thought how nearly they were to correspond to the reality.

Before starting for Adigrat the next day I lunched with General Bertini, commanding the Sila Division, which was then holding part of the front line to the south of Makale. The mess-tent was pitched on a little plateau under the shelter of the hills and, after the days in the Tembien, it seemed to me the height of luxury. I pulled myself together and realized that I had the normal supply of knives and forks, and that I must not empty my glass on the floor before the coffee arrived.

Among those lunching with the General was "Major Bottai", the Governor of Rome, now serving with an infantry battalion in the Sila Division. He had been one of the group of brilliant young men which included Signor

Grandi and Air Marshal Balbo, who had been Signor Mussolini's earliest followers and supporters. His Excellency Bottai, with his great interest in political and economic questions, was one of those largely responsible for the organization of the Corporate State, and had been for a considerable period Minister for Corporations. Indeed, the last time I had seen him had been in all the panoply of a minister, opening exhibitions of arts and crafts and pictures in Florence. In the autumn of 1935 he had handed over his duties to the Vice-Governor of Rome and come to East Africa as a volunteer.

There followed a day at Adigrat while I waited for a car to come from Asmara, so I boldly asked for an interview with Marshal Badoglio as I was anxious to meet the foremost Italian soldier of the day. The Commander-in-Chief was established in one of the tin bungalows of the same pattern as those inhabited by the journalists at Asmara; there was no sentry at the door, merely a couple of Carabinieri strolling up and down at some distance—not even a flag flew over headquarters. Certainly the Army of East Africa wasted neither time nor trouble on outward show. I waited for a few minutes on the verandah, and then a young staff officer told me that the Marshal was ready to see me. I found a man of medium height, with grey hair and bright blue-grey eyes; they were kind and smiling as he talked to me, but I realized that they could be as hard as steel when the occasion demanded. The Marshal had the reputation in the Army of possessing an iron will, combined with extreme rapidity in decision and action. He asked me about my time in the Tembien, how my book was getting on, and told me that he had just been for a flight over Adowa and Axum. "And now," he said, "you are going to Asmara."

"Yes, your Excellency," I replied meekly.

"Never mind," he said with a twinkle, "it will only be for a few days." He clearly understood that Asmara was not a place where I should choose to spend even a few days, but I should have gone anywhere that I was sent by Marshal Badoglio. I should not have cared to dispute any order that he gave me.

All the foreign and Italian journalists were now collected at Asmara and no one was allowed to leave the town. There was an occasional laconic *communiqué* telling of skirmishes on various parts of the front, one of which on the Tacazzè developed into three days' sharp fighting. I subsequently met an Italian officer who had been wounded on this occasion, and who gave me an account of the engagement, which explained many things that had puzzled the foreign military experts. He said that the river was so low at the moment that it could be forded at practically any point, and an Abyssinian force had been able to attack the Italian outposts on the flank and to pin them down in a pass. For the first time apparently in this war the Abyssinians were well led, but still attacked in mass formation; their rifle-fire was very good, but they did not know how to use their machine-guns properly.

I asked him about the very large percentage of killed to wounded among the Italian officers and the Ascari, which exactly reversed the experience of the World War. He said that this was caused by the use of dum-dum bullets by the Abyssinians; these caused the most terrible wounds and meant practically certain death. He himself had had the good fortune to be struck by machine-gun fire. We had heard that the enemy were trying to force their way back into the Tembien, and a division of the Native Army Corps was in action outside Abbi Addi.



Meanwhile December wore on and the order of release did not come. There was a moment when it looked as if the negotiations between Rome, Paris, and London would lead to an end of the war, and delighted journalists began to make plans for packing up and going home, but the hope faded out. The boredom and inaction began to tell on everyone's nerves. Special correspondents worried because they could not send what they called "colour stuff" to their papers—this was explained to me as meaning descriptive articles. These could have been written as the result of their previous visits to the front and the troops, but the order had been given that no names of officers, battalions, divisions, or even Army Corps were to be mentioned, and it is difficult to be picturesque about anonymous generals and divisions. The representatives of the news agencies fumed because the *communiqués* were given out at the same time in Rome, so that their telegrams arrived long after those sent from that city.

Life at Asmara was undoubtedly more comfortable than up at the front, but every inconvenience became multiplied a thousand times. If there was little opportunity of doing any work, there was still less possibility of any form of amusement or exercise, it was impossible to go for walks in the dusty, crowded little streets. Books and papers were unobtainable; the cinema was reported to be very bad and always full; the only two cafés were filthy and always crowded with soldiers and workmen. A good café with a small orchestra or even a wireless would have been a real blessing, not only to the journalists but for the Italian officers who, after months under canvas, were being sent down to Asmara for a little rest, or for convalescence if they had been sick. Even they, who are the most uncomplaining people in the world, did begin to murmur what

a pleasure it would be if there were somewhere that they could go and meet their friends and listen to a little music in comfort. I had never realized before what it meant to live for months without ever hearing a note of music, and I used to think with longing of the few scratched records in the mess of the Gavinana Division which we used to play over and over again.

One of the American journalists whiled away the evenings as we sat on our stools at the Ufficio Stampa with reminiscences of the Japanese occupation of Manchukuo, which he said bore many resemblances to the situation in the Tigray, in that it involved the Army in a great deal of marching and very little fighting. "Ah," he would say in longing tones, "the Japanese were the people who knew how to run a war and look after the Press. They understood the importance of the time factor in newspaper work. If there were anything interesting happening they would even come round to our hotels and get us out of our beds so that we could cable a good story." (This was with reference to the fact that the Italians so often let Addis Ababa be "first with the news", while correspondents in Asmara would often have to wait three days for accurate information.)

"Then," he went on, "every journalist had a private detective attached to him. These men were invaluable; they always knew the best shops, they carried our parcels, they looked after everything, and in return we would help them to write up their reports on our very innocent activities. The Japanese authorities opened good cafés with excellent orchestras, and Geishas were brought over to dance, so both the officers and the journalists had somewhere to go and something to do in the evenings. One day, by mistake, the Army occupied a town before the Press representatives

and the cinema operators arrived, so the next day when we had arrived they marched out and occupied it all over again in proper style. The Chinese could not think what was happening. Ah, those were good days !”

It could not be said that there were “good days” at Asmara, and the faces round the tables at the journalists’ mess became gloomier and gloomier. On December 20th word went round that the Duca di Spoleto was arriving on December 24th at Massawa to assume command of the destroyer flotilla ; would anybody like to go down to meet him ? We were all agreed that Massawa was the most detestable place in the world, that it was all heat, flies, and smells, but at least the trip would mean a break in the intolerable monotony of life at Asmara ; so on the afternoon of December 23rd a party climbed into cars and began the long descent to the coast. Immediately outside the town we ran into a thick Scotch mist, and beside the road grew fir trees which had been planted as part of the governmental afforestation scheme. The tops of the mountains played hide-and-seek among the clouds. I rubbed my eyes and complained to the Italian journalist next to me : “This isn’t East Africa, this is Scotland.”

“Do you generally have camels grazing beside the road in Scotland ?” he inquired, and I then noticed some of the disagreeable and supercilious animals looking at us with their usual bored expression.

“Camels or no camels,” I replied obstinately, “this is Scotland at its worst.” And I had the car stopped while I got out another wrap—I was already wearing a woollen coat, a leather coat, and a scarf, but I wanted something to put over my knees. “And this,” I added bitterly, “is the tropics.” The mist was turning to a steady drizzle, and the deep valleys below us were filled with clouds as solid-

looking as those on which baroque angels repose so comfortably. The road had been cut out of the side of the mountains and swung along with innumerable corners; even the Italian chauffeur was depressed by the weather and crept past motor convoys with reasonable caution.

At Nefasit we joined the splendid new tarred road from Massawa to Decamerè; we left the mist behind and the chauffeur could tear along to his heart's delight, hooting unceasingly. We passed Ghinda in a wide valley, just half-way both in altitude and distance between Asmara and Massawa; beyond it the steep slopes were actually covered with green trees, a pleasant sight in this barren and dry land. The chauffeur stopped and put up the hood. "We shall run into rain in a few minutes," he said, and round the next corner his prophecy was fulfilled; but we were so happy to be out of Asmara that we did not mind. The Italian journalist lifted up a pleasant voice and sang Neapolitan folk songs, varied by a ditty beloved of the Black Shirts, "*Ho lasciato la madre mia*", which has one of those pernicious tunes which go on ringing in one's head for hours. Below us we could see the wet road lying like loops of dark blue ribbon on the mountain-side, and we looked across the deadly monotony of the sand dunes to where we knew the sea must be.

Even the dreaded Massawa had a grey sky, and if the air seemed heavy and damp after the highlands, it was quite cool. We turned off short of the town and drove across a series of sandy flats until we drew up in the middle of the shore establishment of the Italian Navy. But for a slight difference in the buildings we might very well have been at Whale Island. We were greeted by Admiral Barone and explained that we were the advance guard, that the main body was arriving by motor-bus.

"While you are waiting won't you come and have something to drink?" said the Admiral, leading the way to his quarters. "Admiralty House" was a solidly built stone bungalow with a charming loggia over the sea. We sat sipping orangeade with real ice while the Admiral teased me. "Of course we are waiting for a visit from a British cruiser at Aden," he said with a smile. "When she arrives I shall invite you to come and you shall see the fun through these glasses."

I could not summon up an answering smile. "It is the last thing in the world that I want to see," I assured him gravely.

"What a strange Christmas for us all," he went on; "but my wife has sent me a Christmas tree." And he produced a tiny imitation tree which would have fitted in a match-box; it was probably the only Christmas tree in East Africa. "You must have a present." And the Admiral insisted on giving me a length of the silver streamer with which one decorates a real tree.

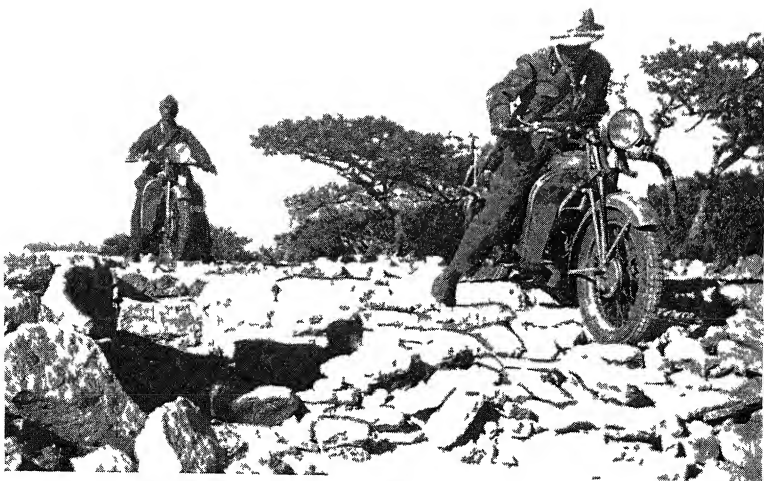
I told the Admiral that I had heard of his goodness to three Englishmen who had been landed at Massawa sick, and whom he had collected and sent on board his hospital ship, but he would not listen to my appreciation of his kindness. "But of course," he said, "they were sailors and ill in a foreign port, that was quite enough for us. What did their nationality matter? You know how strong the feeling is amongst all of us sailors."

I knew it and felt it at the moment, the atmosphere of Admiralty House seemed so familiar, and in just such a way would any British naval officer have received an Italian woman at that time.

The missing contingent turned up, and after a game of oranges and lemons played by the representatives of



MARSHAL BADOGLIO AT THE FRONT



*Above*    CLEARING THE ROAD  
*Below*   THE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

the Ufficio Stampa, we were divided into two parties, one of which went on board a submarine depot ship, and another on board a hospital ship which happened to be in port at the moment.

Needless to say we found "exceptional weather" at Massawa. I have seldom been anywhere in the world that I was not assured that the weather was exceptional. The next morning there were grey lowering clouds which looked like greasy and dirty cotton-wool; the rain began, a drizzle at first, which turned to a downpour and blotted out the mountains and the town, everything in fact except the tramp steamers lying at anchor around us. Fortunately it cleared up about four o'clock when we were to go on board the base hospital ship the *California*. She had started life as a Cunard liner and had been sold to the Italians to carry passengers and corn between San Francisco and Genoa. Her great holds had now been transformed into splendid wards, and refrigerating apparatus had been installed. Less important at the moment, this had been the greatest blessing during the terrible heat of the summer and had probably saved many lives. Very few of the 906 beds on board were occupied, so small was the percentage of sickness among either the soldiers or workmen in East Africa; indeed, most of the cases were what would have been found in a hospital in any country. The Italian hospital ships each carry a small contingent of members of the Red Cross, familiarly known in English as "V.A.D's."

When we had seen all the wonders of the ship, the two operating theatres with their marvellous system of lighting, the X-ray room with what its proud owner told me was the most modern equipment in the world, we were entertained to what we greedily described as a



real tea—there were bread-and-butter and jam and even cakes! The “V.A.D’s.” who were off duty came and joined the party, and I had an opportunity of talking to the Princess Elisabetto Cito Sambuy, a member of an old Piedmontese family. “But,” she said, “there are no titles here, we are all just addressed as ‘Sister’. We have all had hospital training and a course at the special institute in Rome for tropical diseases; so far we have not seen any tropical diseases, just a few cases of typhoid and paratyphoid. We have professional nurses among us; they have abandoned their careers for the time being and are here as volunteers, receiving no pay.”

“All our V.A.D’s. are the most splendid workers,” the officer in command told me; “we have chosen them with the greatest care; we were not going to have women who thought they would come out just to have a good time.”

I looked at the kind, grave faces under their white head-dresses and I thought how little the Italian type has changed since the days of the Renaissance; I had seen those same faces in hundreds of pictures of Madonnas and angels.

That night the whole party were asked to dine in the *Helouan*, where half the party were living. She had already made several voyages between Massawa and Naples, and we asked the officer in command if he could tell us approximately the number of sick who had been repatriated. After a calculation he said: “Three thousand at the outside, and many of them have come back.” It was a tiny proportion when it is remembered that there must have been about 300,000 men in East Africa at that time, taking into consideration the Navy, the Army, work men, and “camp-followers”, many of whom had

been in the colony since the previous February. "One of our difficulties," went on the doctor, "is that the men will do anything to hoodwink the doctors, and dealing with such large numbers it is difficult to guarantee that every man is physically fit before he starts."

It was decided that we must celebrate Christmas Eve with a bottle of champagne, and after the appropriate toasts had been drunk we gathered round a piano while the Surgeon-Captain, the representative of the Havas Agency, and a German correspondent sang the songs of their own countries.

At twelve o'clock the officer of the watch entered and informed the officer in command that Mass was about to begin, and we followed the Surgeon-Captain out on to the deck. We leant on the rail and looked down on the forecastle below us. The brilliant arc lights blazed on the officers and men packed tightly together on the narrow deck space, the sea looked like black marble until a launch passed and the foam of its wake sparkled white and dazzling. Behind the altar hung a great green, white, and red ensign, another formed the frontal, and two candles in hurricane lanterns provided the altar lights. A little *presepio*—the traditional representation of the infant Christ in the stable which stands in every Italian church at Christmas—had been made by the men and was illuminated with a festoon of tiny electric lights. The Chaplain robed himself and the Mass began. The only music was a carol with a simple melody sung by a soloist and a choir of sailors; the bugle rang out at the elevation of the Host, a few prayers followed, and the brief service was over. It was Christmas Day. The officers came up to shake hands, and we gave one another the charming Italian greeting, *Buon Natale*—a good Christmas.

The next morning we were asked to attend the ceremony when the officers and men of his new command were to be presented to the Duca di Spoleto. They were formed up on three sides of the football ground of hard sand belonging to the Naval Base. Admiral Turr, commanding the squadron in East African waters, arrived with his staff, and in a few minutes he was followed by the Duca di Spoleto. Standing about 6 feet 3 inches, he was one of the most popular officers in the Italian Navy, a famous polo-player and an enthusiast about motor-boat racing; he had, as someone cheerfully informed me, "broken every bone in his body at one time or another". He and the Admiral mounted a small platform which had been erected, and I found that Italian Admirals shared with the Generals the capacity for making brief and excellent speeches. Admiral Turr said that the fleet in East African waters was proud to welcome His Royal Highness, proud to be serving their country in this difficult moment, and to be able to show their patriotism and their devotion to the House of Savoy. The Admiral ended with a touching reference to the men of the Third Army who had died in the Great War and who lie around their General in the war cemetery of Redipuglia. "Today their voices are ringing across the sea, crying 'Italy, Italy!'"

The Duke is the second son of the King's first cousin, the late Duke D'Aosta, who commanded the famous Third Army during the World War. After the Italian defeat at Caporetto, the Duke D'Aosta and his men arrived by forced marches and held the line of the Piave against the victorious troops of Germany and Austria-Hungary; it was a stand which saved Italy, for had the Third Army failed the enemy would have poured down into the Lombard plain and the whole country would have been

at their mercy. The legend was propagated during the war that it was the French and British reinforcements which had stopped the advance, but no foreign reinforcements arrived till a month later. Italy saved herself. When he died a few years ago, the Duke D'Aosta left a request that he should not be buried in the Pantheon with the other princes of the House of Savoy, but in the war cemetery in the mountains in the midst of his men.

The Admiral's speech at an end, he and the Duca di Spoleto inspected the crews, and the Duke then asked to have the small party of foreigners presented to him, and the ceremony was at an end. The Admiral lingered for a moment to ask if we would not go on board his flagship for a glass of vermouth before lunch. The weather had now recovered, the sea was a pale opalescent blue, and the deeper blue of the mountains faded into a cloudless sky. I amused our hosts by saying that I should like to have a bathe. "Did I not know," they inquired, "that the only sport at Massawa was fishing for sharks, and that there was quite a thriving industry of exporting their more succulent parts to China, where they were highly esteemed as a delicacy?" My desire to bathe died a very sudden death.

The Italian Navy had decided to amuse itself at Christmas by organizing a lottery and a tombola; the numbers were to be drawn that night in the flagship, and Admiral Turr very kindly asked the small party who were remaining at Massawa if we would not come and see the fun. When we got on board again that evening we found all the captains and many of the officers of the fleet assembled on the quarter-deck, while the drum with the tickets was being rotated in the most professional manner on the upper deck. At intervals a number would be shouted


and a signal made to the ship in which the winner was serving ; his triumph would be celebrated by the firing of a rocket and a round of cheers. We sat about with cool drinks and cigarettes and talked of Italy and China—where most of the officers seemed to have been lately—and discussed whether Massawa was the worst naval station in the world. At 1 a.m. the last number was drawn, the Duca di Spoleto was piped over the side, and the Admiral sent us back to our ship in his launch. Certainly, as Admiral Barone had said, “it was a strange Christmas”.

Two days later, at Asmara, I went to see the Moslem ceremony which marks the end of the great fast of Ramadan. The faithful assembled in the big square outside the mosque. Each man with any pretensions to riches or importance arrived with a small boy pattering at his heels and carrying his praying-mat. As they sat cross-legged on the ground, the red tarbooshes of the Ascari and the bright turbans of the other men made the only splashes of colour that I had seen in East Africa. It looked as if a great white carpet with a variegated pattern had suddenly been spread over the square. The priest arrived and read prayers from the steps of the mosque, the carpet came to life and turned to a field of bright flowers swaying in the wind as the tarbooshes and the turbans bowed and nodded in unison. The service at an end, the Italian Commissioner for the district addressed the crowd and then presented certificates conferring minor titles on some of the Moslem community. The whole affair seemed singularly tame and uninteresting to me.

I remembered what the end of Ramadan had been at Tangier when I was a small child and Morocco an independent state, but little changed from the days of the Prophet. The Soko was crammed with armed men, the

wild-eyed Berbers from the Atlas Mountains, the men from the edges of the Sahara with their fierce coal-black faces, the rich merchants of the town on their fat mules. A sheik, who was also a saint by right of descent from one of the companions of the Prophet, rode through on his splendid Arab, his armed followers at his heels and the faithful surging round him trying to kiss his feet and his draperies. Then the "powder play" would begin; waves of mounted men with high red saddles would sweep across the market-place standing up in their stirrups and firing their long guns above their heads as they came. The crowd would surge and yell in a frenzy of excitement; the great fast—no scrap of food, no drop of water from sunrise to sunset, and then only the most meagre fare—was at an end, and when the last shot was fired everyone went home to a feast which (if the food held out) lasted till the following morning.

Civilization, progress, certificates of good behaviour are, of course, very excellent things and to be admired and applauded by all right-minded people, but they are certainly neither exciting nor picturesque. I should like to have seen those smug, fat merchants of Asmara scuttling like rabbits as the Berber horsemen charged, turned, and charged again, their burnouses flying in the wind and their yells mingling with the crack of their guns. Most reprehensible sentiments on my part, but I wondered if the crowd would not have enjoyed it too?



## CHAPTER XIV

### REFLECTIONS IN THE RED SEA

THE car seemed unnaturally full. Instead of the bag containing my camp bed and blankets and a modest hold-all, my usual equipment for going up to the front, there were the suit-cases and oddments of "European luggage". My soldier-chauffeur looked round my little room in the barracks. "Have you really got everything?" he inquired anxiously. It was easy to answer "yes", for there were neither drawers nor cupboards in which my possessions could hide themselves. I had distributed the small and odd presents which were so gratefully received in Asmara—half a tin of jam, some condensed milk, and the remains of a precious stock of candles which had been bought at Adi Caieh.

All the way down to Massawa I tried to make myself realize that I was really leaving Eritrea. We swung round the familiar corners where the road had been blasted out of the mountain-side, and the precipice on the other side fell sheer down to the valleys hundreds of feet below. I drew my woollen scarf over my mouth and nose as we hooted furiously in the dust of the motor-lorries, and then swept past with an inch or two to spare. I discussed the war and life in the colony with the chauffeur, and we exchanged experiences and reminiscences of the roads. "How many bends are there between Asmara and Massawa?" I asked him finally.

"Two thousand, three hundred," he replied; "it appears impossible, but it is really true."

It seemed that I had never lived any other life, that Europe and its civilization were just a dream of a former existence, a discovered country to which no traveller could return, that my real life was here, with the Italian troops among the wild stony mountains of Eritrea and the Tigrai. "You are going away, you are leaving it all," I kept on saying to myself. "First of all you will see Italy, the vineyards and the olive groves, the blue mountains with their little golden towns, the great palaces of Naples, of Rome, and of Florence. And then, the familiar grey haze and the red sunset of a winter's afternoon in London. There will be books and music and pictures; there will be newspapers; there will be baths, large and hot; you will not be smothered in dust; you will be able to get long, cool drinks; there will be comfortable chairs, and electric light, and posts all day long; and, best of all, you will see your friends. What a lot there is to be enjoyed."

At that moment the chauffeur and I said what we thought of the lorry ahead with a civilian driver who paid no attention to our horn, and compelled us to crawl along blinded and choked with dust. The road had been widened at the corners (all corners are right-angled on mountains in Eritrea), and the only thing to be done was to accelerate as hard as possible and pass at the next corner, praying that nothing was coming up. It had always been a consolation to me to find that officers who had served all through the Great War and the Lybian wars were as frightened as I was on the roads in Eritrea. I laughed when I remembered that I acquired a totally unmerited reputation for courage owing to the fact that terror always



paralysed me, and that at the worst moments I had sat perfectly still, incapable of uttering a sound.

As we neared Massawa we met a long string of motor-lorries filled with soldiers; how strange their pink-and-white faces looked. Never before had I thought of Italians as having "pink-and-white faces", but for months I had seen nothing but men burnt a deep brown by the African sun.

I had been given a passage home in the *Helouan*, the hospital ship in which I had dined on Christmas Eve, and which was now returning to Italy with invalids and a few naval officers whose period of service in East African waters was at an end. It was pleasant to be greeted as an old friend when I came over the side. It was also pleasant and very surprising that the first person whom I saw was the Chaplain to the Black Shirt Legion who had been my first acquaintance on board the *Biancamano*. This involved, of course, an exchange of all our experiences since that long-ago day at Adi Qualà at the beginning of October when I had seen the Legion marching up to Adowa. Now, to his great disgust, he was being sent back to Italy to convalesce after bronchitis, which had affected his heart. I tried to console him by saying how lovely it would be to see Italy again.

"Yes," he admitted grudgingly; "but I hated leaving the war, and I feel that all my friends are there."

I waxed eloquent about all the drawbacks of life in East Africa and the delights of civilization, but his words somehow stirred a faint doubt in my mind. An officer came up to join us. "I saw you that evening at Agulà with the Bande during the advance on Makale." More reminiscences followed. "And then what did you do? . . . Did you know so and so? Where is he now? . . . Were you at such and such a place?"

We had to explain many things to the group that gradually gathered round, and I told of our efforts to eat the goose that night at mess.

"But," said the officer, "it was I who shot that goose with my revolver and sent it as a present to Collonello Tosti." I had hastily to say that it was a very good goose, but that that the Ascari cook had not known how to cook it. "Ah," said the officer gravely, "it should have been boiled, not roasted," and we all laughed.

Life on board the *Helouan* was at once strange and familiar; the convalescent officers were representatives of the types which I had come to know so well, and their talk was that of any of the messes in which I had been, but the naval doctors were a new type. They were all enthusiasts about their work and their ship. One of the reasons why I had been so anxious to return in a hospital ship had been my desire to go more closely into the question of the health of the Army and the workmen in Eritrea and the occupied territory. Was it really true that the percentage of sickness was so small? The *Helouan* was engaged in transporting to Italy the men whose repatriation had been ordered for reasons of health; a voyage in her obviously provided an opportunity for first-hand observation and inquiry. She had accommodation for 600 sick, and all the beds were occupied on this trip. Collonello Ralla, the officer in command, repeated the figures he had given me at dinner on Christmas Eve—"Six per thousand" had been the numbers up to the beginning of January 1936.

"What are they mostly suffering from?"

"Some from heart trouble as the result of the altitudes. It is a curious fact, for which I do not know the scientific reason, that altitudes are more trying in East Africa than in the Alps. Then there are malaria cases, largely men

who suffered from the disease previously and managed to conceal it before they went to the colony. There is some dysentery and a certain amount of intestinal troubles. Others are cases of men who have been out there for some time, have been unwell, and need rest and change to complete their convalescence."

Even before we left Massawa some of the patients were sitting about on deck, and every day the number increased. I asked if I might see the sick, and I was taken round by one of the senior doctors.

If the *Helouan* had once been a "luxury liner" she was now a "luxury hospital ship". There were small wards for operation cases; the first-class cabins on the main deck had been removed and beds installed for a hundred men on each side of the ship. In the stern was a special section which could be shut off with iron gates for infectious cases; there was a bacteriological laboratory (complete with guinea-pigs); a new system of ventilation had been installed which could also supply hot or cold air as the temperature demanded; there was an operating theatre and an X-ray installation. Everywhere the equipment was the most modern which could be obtained. "The best of everything is bought for the Italian Navy," was the brief comment. There was also a complete chemist's shop and a laundry with all the latest electrical gadgets. As one of the officers explained to me, the *Helouan* was in fact a self-contained hospital for a small town. She was beautifully clean and fresh, and the patients were loud in their praise of their quarters, as indeed they well might be.

The bare brown hills of Arabia and the Soudan slid slowly past on either side, and I sat idly in the sun and thought of all that had happened since I had seen them three months previously. As I looked back it seemed as

if I were watching a film ; scene after scene stood out clear and sharp in the brilliant light of the African sun : my first expedition along the old frontier, when I had stood in the observation post under the crest of the ridge above the valley of the Mareb and looked away to the mountains above Adowa—my first dinner in a mess with the staff of the 2nd Army Corps at Adi Ugri ; how strange it had seemed then, how familiar an experience it had become—my first sight of the Native Cavalry at Forte Suarez and the mimic attack on the hill ; later I was to see them at work under war conditions—the drive through the night to Fortino Coatit and the long wait in the gathering light with General de Bono for the first news of the advance—that midnight walk across the Mareb in the wake of the Gavinana Division—Ras Gugsä standing in the brilliant sunshine in the old fort at Adigrat when he was proclaimed chief of the Tigrai—Adowa and Axum, the ceaseless procession of chiefs and priests crowding into the political office to make their acts of submission—the long talks in the mess of the Gavinana with General Villa Santa as to what could be done to relieve the misery of the native population and particularly of the children—the crowds waiting so patiently round the military temporary hospitals—the advance of the 1st Army Corps to Makale, the troops climbing the passes and trudging across the plain—Makale itself, the line of batteries along the crest of the ridge, and away to the south the great peak above Amba Alaji and the mountain chain that blocked the road to Dessiè—the Italian officers and men in the markets being outrageously cheated over chickens and eggs, playing with the babies and putting *soldi* into their grubby little hands—the march through the Tembien, our column winding along the

mountain trails ; the climb down the Passo Abarò—the long days on the roads, the crawling lines of motor convoys, the heat and the choking dust.

And as the background to every scene, the stony, barren mountains, fierce and cruel in the burning sun. I thought of the kindliness and the comradeship, of the cheerfulness which made light of danger and discomfort and monotony. I smiled when I recollected one foreigner who remarked to me what a serious nation the Italians were, they never seemed to laugh. Messes were like well-bred families, who do not inflict their jokes on strangers ; foreign correspondents who paid hurried visits to the front were entertained with a friendly courtesy, but not with jokes and chaff which were “private property”. I was leaving it all behind me ; never again should I share the fun and good fellowship of a mess and laugh at its jokes.

Another day and night and I woke to see the long, level sides of the Suez Canal ; the next morning the hills of Crete were a low line on the horizon. “Tomorrow,” we said, “we shall see Italy.” And the following afternoon the blue hills of Calabria rose out of the sea, while Etna with its snows hung like a cloud in the sky. Nearer and nearer came the land ; we could see the little yellow towns on the shore or perched like eagles’ nests on the tops of the rocks ; there were patches of brilliant green corn, the silver-grey olive groves and the long lines of the vines. We leant against the bulwarks. “Look !” I exclaimed. “Look at all the cities !”

The naval officers corrected my Italian with roars of laughter. “Those aren’t cities,” they said, “those are villages.” They knew nothing of East Africa except Massawa.

“To me,” I explained, “they look like cities ; remember that for three months I have seen nothing but

miserable collections of hovels like Adowa and Abbi Addi."

The Straits of Messina began to close in on either side, there was the little square castle on its spit of sand; even Reggio, with the big ferry-boats waiting for the international trains, was unexpectedly exciting and romantic. Here was the lovely, friendly land for which I had longed so often.

It was our last night on board, and after a final rubber of bridge we sat about gossiping in the saloon. The *Helouan* provided many of the comforts which I had promised myself—there were iced drinks to be had by merely giving an order to a steward, but I was no longer thirsty; there were hot shower baths, but I was no longer covered with dust; the radio worked and we could pick up Rome and Paris and London, but people always seemed to be making boring speeches in pompous voices. The doubt which the little priest's words had implanted in my mind seemed to be growing—was I really glad to be leaving East Africa?

The voice of a convalescent officer broke in on my thoughts: "You know, I have seen you before." How many conversations in the last three months had begun with those words! They were introduction enough in Eritrea and the Tigrai.

"Where?" I asked eagerly.

"In the Tembien with Pirzio Biroli."

The old familiar talk began again. Here was someone with whom I could discuss places and experiences known only to a handful even of the officers of the Army of East Africa. No, he had not been down the Passo Abarò, but he knew all about it and was kind and tactful enough to speak of it with proper respect. He himself had been

in the fight at Abbi Addi; the Abyssinians had attacked in great numbers and had fought bravely, Diamanti's Black Shirts had formed a hollow square and driven off every attack and, when the enemy broke, had pursued them for a considerable distance. No, the tanks had not been able to get to Abbi Addi, the pass over which we had scrambled had proved too difficult for them. From the details of the fight the conversation drifted to the country—how we hated the monotony, the lack of trees and water; how weary we had become of the arid, stony mountains; how we had longed for Italy. I told him how often I had said that once I left East Africa I should never desire to see it again.

"I know, I know," he replied. "I have said the same thing myself over and over again." And then we looked at each other and laughed rather shamefacedly.

"And now?" I asked.

"I am going back as soon as I can get there, and all the convalescent men are saying the same thing."

"I wish I were," I said; "already I am homesick for the Tembien."

That wild and savage country was beginning to tug at my heartstrings, but even stronger was my longing for the life I had known and shared. I understood for the first time what many men feel about war, a strange and complex emotion, not easy to analyse or set down in words. Not the crude and brutal desire to kill with which they are credited by the pacifist intellectual, but an eagerness to risk their lives for an ideal, a boyish love of adventure, and the enjoyment of a human relationship which is only called into existence by the sharing of dangers and hardships. For the time being they have escaped from that fundamental loneliness which is the usual lot of all

human souls. I had come to realize that on active service, "where men of all ranks work together for aims and objects which are not for their personal advantage, there arises among them a spirit, a tradition, and an unwritten law which it is not very easy for the world at large to understand or to sympathize with". Even I, a woman of another nation, had recognized and shared this spirit, but still, because I was a woman, the thing that I desired was that the war should end; not only for the personal and selfish reason that I shrank from the thought of the possibility of death for the men who were my friends, but for the sake of the helpless peasants of Abyssinia.

A writer in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* summed up the history of that country as "a gloomy record of internecine wars, barbarous deeds, and unstable government; of adventurers usurping thrones only to be themselves unseated, and of raids, rapine, and pillage."

I wanted to see these horrors put an end to. I wanted security and justice for the people. I wanted the liberated slaves to be able to enjoy their freedom. I wanted the sick to be cared for. I wanted the children to be clothed and fed. I remembered the invitation of my friends in the political office at Adowa: "Come back in three years and see what we have done for the people."

They too were fighting. It was a war against ignorance, dirt, disease, and apathy; a war in which there would be no spectacular victories and no discharge, only years of hard work and banishment and loneliness. But when I compared the contentment and well-being of the native population in Eritrea with the misery in the Tigray, I knew that it was a war that would be won in the end by the officers of the Italian Colonial Service.





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